

烙印の紋章 XI

あかつきの空を竜は翔ける〈上〉

杉原智則
イラスト●3

電撃文庫

Rakuin no Monshou

– Emblem of the Branded –

- Volume 11 -

The Dragon Soars into the Sky at Dawn (First Part)

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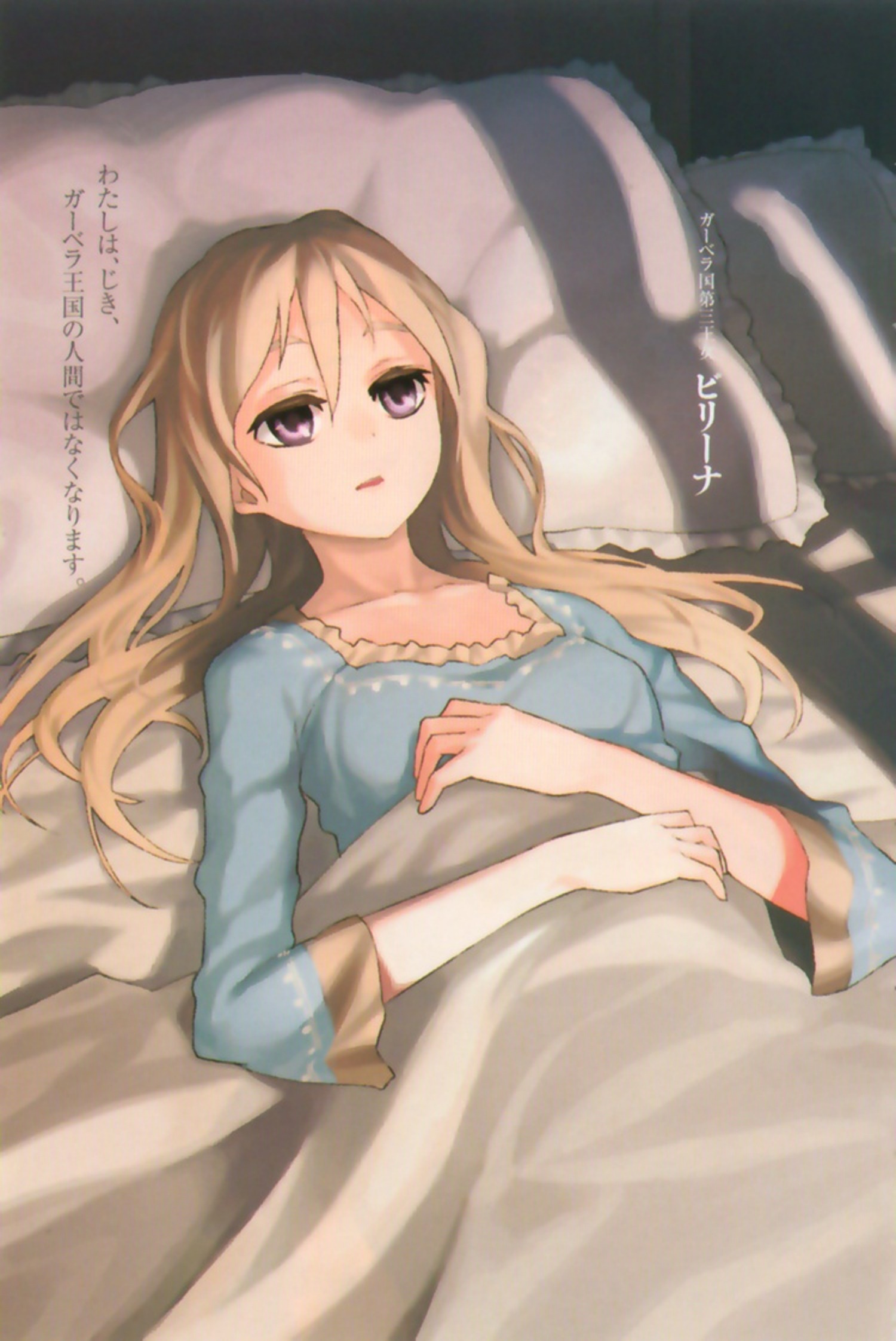
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イラスト●3


偽りの皇太子 オルバ
なにか、わかる気がするのさ。
グールがなにを考え、おれを招くといったかを。


ガーベラ国第三王女
ビリーナ
わたしは、じき、
ガーベラ王国の人間ではなくなります。


アリオンの小覇王
カセリア・ジャミル
どうせなら騎士の国ガーベラから、
そして剣奴の国メフィウスからも、
ぜひ腕利きの者を集めて、
おれに挑みかかってきてほしいものだよ。


アリオンの圧力に屈したか。
エンデ公国次期大公
エリック・ル・ドーリア


メフィウス皇女
イネーリ・メフィウス
皇子の正体を知る者など、わたしひとりでいい。
いずれこの国を治めるであろう男の急所を握る人物などは。


メフィウス皇帝
ただ、もうひとつ。もうひとつだけ、
確認しておきたいことがある。

Central Continent



デザイン●カマベヨシヒコ

Prologue

Kaseria Jamil had been fighting back yawns for a while now.

The voices of the priests chanting in prayer reverberated throughout the inside of the cave. This was a ceremony held before going to war. All of Allion's officers and men who were summoned to it must keep their eyes closed and their hands joined before their waists.

The cave gave into an underground passageway connected to the sea and, even where Kaseria stood, his feet were wet from the waves that rolled in. The red flames from the pine torches were reflected on the sea's surface, where a number of golden boats bobbed and swayed. This was a ceremony not only to pray for victory, but also for safety at sea. The priests were conscientiously reciting one-by-one the long list of names of every spirit that dwelt in the gold, steel and wood that had been used to construct the boats.

Looks like it's going to keep dragging on. Kaseria had lost count of how many times already he had desperately bit back his yawns. All the spirits of Allion, even the ones living in the tiniest grains of sand, all love war. If you really want to please them, it'd be much better to have our braves board the ships, slaughter the enemy soldiers, and consecrate their red and bleeding hearts to the spirits.

Kaseria would be twenty-two this year. He was tall and lean with a fair complexion. With his elegant features, he looked like a young man who would be perfectly at home playing music or reciting poetry in the royal court of Allion. In fact, and although Kaseria did have that side to him, what stimulated him from the bottom of his heart was not the splendour of court life but its very opposite: the battlefield, where the sound of gunshots flew and steel collided to devour lives.

Allion was a country which did not lack for wars. So much so that if one were to peruse the past twenty years of its history, it would be difficult to find any part of it that did not involve some description of battle. In that sense, Kaseria, the first-born son of its war-loving – slaughter and destruction-loving – king was undoubtedly a heaven-sent child for Allion.

There was nothing more tedious than this ceremony, but he was able to endure it by thinking that beyond it lay that moment of ecstasy.

Still, his concentration was apt to wander. From time to time, Kaseria would half open his eyes. In front of the anchored, golden war boats, an equal number of priestesses stood side-by-side. They chanted the prayers in time to the priests but the cylindrical robes they wore were of thin cloth and, since they had immersed themselves in the sea before the ceremony, their skin showed faintly through them.

Kaseria and his men stood behind them. Which meant that Kaseria was able to admire to his heart's content the row of the priestesses' backsides before him. *That one on the right is a bit small, but the shape is nice. I'd like to rub those cheeks on the left together, but they look kind of heavy? The ass with the best balance of proportions is the one right in the middle. But that really visible bruise on it bothers me. Well then…*

"See anything you like?" Someone stealthily whispered in his ear.

For a second, Kaseria's eyes opened wide before he immediately lowered his eyelids.

"Lance, what are you doing talking in the middle of a ceremony? It's an insult to the spirits," he replied in a low voice. "You'll incur their wrath. The warships will be caught in storms along the way, or the wind will only blow from behind the enemy and flames will spread throughout our camp. Ah, so scary. Now, hurry up and close your eyes, and mentally recite a charm to calm the spirits."

"The spirits will get angry? Good. At least that will make the war interesting." The man with an eye-patch over his left eye – Lance Mazpotter – chuckled.

He was more than thirty years older than Kaseria. Perhaps that was why his manner of speaking was somewhat irreverent, even towards his lord and prince.

"But you really did something stupid, taking advantage of a family quarrel in Ende to move the army."

In fact, he even went as far as calling him stupid.

Kaseria Jamil used to be known as "Allion's Little Tyrant". This was not, contrary to what was now said in various countries, on account of his quick and decisive tactics. In the first place, Kaseria had been called that long before his first campaign, and besides, it was not an affectionate nickname given to their young future ruler by those closest to him.

If something displeased him even slightly, he would scream, cry and behave violently.

If it had just been that, it could still have passed as charming proof that he "shows all the signs of valour". In his case though, it went beyond that. He would tell his father things like, "that retainer didn't give way to me," or "he didn't greet me," then demand they be put to death.

For better or for worse, the king of Allion was particularly indulgent towards his first-born son. Although naturally, he did not go as far as sentencing them to death as the boy wanted, he would still expressly summon even his chief retainers between audiences and have them apologise before his son.

And thus, Kaseria became "Allion's Little Tyrant", and continued to be called by that nickname until he was thirteen. It was when he was thirteen, exactly at the time of the fall of Atall – a country north of Allion – that Lance Mazpotter, known then as the "One-Eyed Dragon of Atall", entered the service of the Royal House of Jamil.

"What are you on about? I'm just obeying Father's orders."

"Don't play dumb at this point. the king didn't have the slightest interest in this. Apart from anything else, there's only just been that affair with the Dytiann princess. the king is gradually turning his attention away from the outside and concentrating his energy on ruling the inside of the country."

the prince of Allion and the veteran commander who know served that same Allion – which had once destroyed his own country – as one of its most famous generals, exchanged whispers with one another.

"To see what is right and not act upon it is a want of courage[1]," Kaseria pronounced with a triumphant air. "Just like Allion, Ende is a country descended from the Magic Dynasty. Even though we are geographically apart, it is our fate and destiny to one day be united under the same flag. To turn away from the opportunity before us would be sheer folly."

"Oh?"

"Furthermore, the relations between the three countries at the centre of the continent seem to be unstable. Ende and Garbera only just crossed spears, and even Mephius, which took Ende's part in that conflict, is being rocked by a foolish civil war."

"I see. I've heard that somewhere before already. Now, where was it? Oh right, I said it myself."

The One-Eyed Dragon of Atall laughed soundlessly. Although he was over fifty years of age, his burly frame clad in chainmail gave off an invisible energy and boasted such an imposing appearance that even his allies found him hard to approach. Compared to him, Kaseria looked as slender as a woman.

“And that’s why I thought it would earn your approval, Lance, but alas...”

“Quit it with the pretentious talk. This is just your usual bad habit coming out again.”

“My bad habit?”

“Others have been saying that although you used to be highly-strung, you’ve become surprisingly adult-like these past few years. Back when I first met you, you didn’t like the look on my face and kicked me, and then when I responded by spanking you, you bawled to your father to have my head chopped off. Well, deep down, you haven’t changed at all since then. When the affair with the Dytian princess happened, you’d gone off to the countryside to meet some woman and couldn’t take part in it.”

“…”

“You’re just like an infant. Even if it isn’t something you were particularly interested in, as soon as you see a chance to get it, suddenly you desperately want it. You’d only just finished a long campaign. If it hadn’t been for that Dytiann affair, then around about now, you’d be spending your days chasing women’s asses without thinking about wanting to go to war again so soon. And naturally, you should have flatly turned down Prince Jeremie’s request.”

The “Dytiann affair” that Lance kept bringing up was not the military campaign against the Holy Dytiann Alliance that Kaseria himself had also taken part in.

The fighting had been fierce, but the difference in strength that had existed from the start between the two countries meant that Allion had gradually driven its opponent into a corner. the king of Dytiann, who served as both ruler and head of the church, had several times attempted to end the war by sending letters proposing peace negotiations. Allion however had turned a deaf ear, seeing it instead as a sign that its opponent was growing weak, and had started working towards toppling the enemy nation from within.

The end result was that the king of Dytiann decided to present Allion with his own head to demonstrate his surrender, and save his retainers and his people.

The people had, of course, been deeply grieved. So too had the army commanders and retainers, however, in order for the king's death to not be in vain, they had resigned themselves to becoming part of Allion.

Tasked with carrying out the negotiations, General Randius, the commander of the right-wing of Allion's expeditionary force, was stationed with his troops at Dytiann's royal palace. As the king had no sons, his partners in negotiation were the two young princesses. They spent every day discussing numerous matters, including when to hand over the palace, the treatment that the royal family would receive, and the conditions for disarmament. The negotiations themselves proceeded smoothly, but not even three days had passed when something changed in Randius.

The sister princesses of Dytiann were famed throughout the neighbouring countries for their beauty.

Randius – a man who already had a wife and children, was known at court as a devoted husband, and about whom many heart-warming anecdotes were told – was dazzled by the elder of the sisters, a girl of not quite eighteen.

He forced her to give her body to him but, when he came to sleep with her, the princess instead stabbed him through the throat with a sword that she had concealed by the bed. Then, as though following after her father, the princess had committed suicide by slitting her own throat. The officers and men of Dytiann's army were enraged.

"We may have been defeated, but Allion's bestial behaviour is inexcusable."

"Everyone, if you don't want them to rape your wives and murder your friends, seize your swords once more. Drive those savages from our country!"

The generals cried out as one and rose in revolt throughout Dytiann.

Furthermore, a part of Allion's soldiers stationed at the royal palace – in other words, those who had been the subordinates of General Randius, who had been killed by the princess – had, for some reason, joined the people of Dytiann and fought beside them, their spears raised high.

The revolt did not last a week before being put down by the troops who were swiftly dispatched by the king of Allion. However, just as Lance has mentioned earlier, Kaseria had, at the time, already gone off to the countryside on the pretext of "shaking off the dirt from the campaign," and so had been unable to take part in the subjugation.

“Lance, is the rumour true? You joined the subjugation forces?” Kaseria asked quietly. His eyes were shining almost boyishly. Lance nodded with exaggerated gravity.

“It’s true. Although only sixteen, the dead princess’ younger sister was every bit the elegant beauty that her older sister was. She was the one who convinced Allion’s soldiers to join the uprising. I will make the man with the greatest achievements king of Dytian – I will give him the right to break into my bedroom, kiss my skin and enjoy my thighs, she said. I will whisper love into that hero’s ear, rake my nails along his back, and, if he desires it, I will even play the slave for every ruffian among his comrades to enjoy, she said.”

“I’ve seen portraits of the sisters,” Kaseria almost ground his teeth. “If only I hadn’t put off the pleasure of meeting them because of thinking that, since Dytiann became part of Allion, I could do so whenever. I wanted to one day see them with chains around both their necks and their asses lined up side-by-side,” he said, with the expression of one regretting something from the bottom of their heart. “But I wouldn’t have done it through brute force like Randius. Capturing a woman needs the same preparations as taking a castle, and from the start, I was going to make arrangements to gather information, and break through their ramparts and their bulwarks one by one, until the proud princesses knelt at my feet of their own wills.”

“Women are like castles. That’s also something you’ve heard from me,” Lance jeered.

The ceremony was still continuing on and, perhaps because the priests were getting into it, their chanting was starting to sound more like a kind of melody.

Once it turns to that, there’s still a long way to go, Kaseria murmured in a whisper.

“And?” He then asked Lance. A smile formed on his lips that were surrounded by a sparse beard.

“And what?”

“O my esteemed mentor in swordsmanship, warfare, and women. You’ve done a fine job of making me listen to all sorts of harsh words, but will my right-hand man, Lance Mazpotter, take part in this war or not?”

“There’s no escaping it, since I’m here and the prince called me his right-hand man. Since when he swings his sword, that will definitely create an opening at his right side, then I will literally stand at his right and take on the task of driving away savage enemy

swords."

"I'm not a child anymore!"

From a teasing smile, Kaseria's manner made a complete turnaround and he looked as though he was seriously going to lash out. His voice was so loud that one of the priests who had been engrossed in their chanting turned around, startled, and some of the priestesses let out small shrieks.

It was a scene that vividly demonstrated how much Prince Kaseria Jamil of Allion was feared by those around him. For Kaseria, however, Lance would forever be a one-of-a-kind existence, and he immediately returned to his previous expression.

"These past few years, Ende's soldiers have only experienced skirmishes. Is there anyone among them with the skill to even attack my right-hand man? I said earlier that this is a good opportunity since the relationship between the three countries is unstable, but I really hope that some competent men from Garbera, the country of knights, and Mephius, the country of gladiators, will band together to challenge me," he laughed as he spoke.

It was a smile as innocent as a baby's.

However, Kaseria Jamil was a man who could cut a person down while smiling like that. Or at any rate, that was how most people within Allion's domains perceived him.

No. Lance Mazpotter, present beside him, was perhaps the only one who clearly rejected that perception. *This man isn't a bloodthirsty fiend. He's just a child. And just like a child, he can easily break another person's things, and easily be hurt*.

Lance Mazpotter was a man who had accomplished many feats of arms, who had been involved with many women, and who did not have many regrets to tie him to this world. The one wish that made such a man cling to this world, the one thing that he wanted to see through to the end, was that moment in which the childish young man called Kaseria Jamil would bring down the flames of calamity on the entire continent before finally seizing supremacy over it.

Chapter 1
Rumblings

Part 1

The city of Dairan, at the northernmost tip of Ende, was defended by high ramparts that protected it from invasion by the nomadic northern tribes. These nomadic tribes were divided into numerous clans and usually lived as they pleased. However, they would occasionally commit piracy along their southern coast, and occasionally attempt to trample into Ende's territory. The trend to their movements was utterly unfathomable: sometimes they would go a year or two without taking any action, while at other times, there would be two attacks within a month.

Eric Le Doria, who was to be the next Grand Duke of Ende, had often fought them beyond Dairan's protective ramparts. From a very young age, he had been entrusted to the care of the Plutos family – who had governed Dairan for generation after generation – and in that wild and rough land, he had fought to his utmost with sword and gun, and had learned of that joy that was second to none; of gathering with his comrades around the campfire after battle, still covered in the blood of his foes, to boast together of their feats.

Given this particularity, Dairan was clearly at odds with the "aristocratic" traits that were prized by other Endeans – traits such as dressing splendidly or never ostensibly injuring another person, but instead preferring to exchange verbal quips laced with lethal doses of poison.

To take other examples, Safia, the capital of the Grand Duchy, was known throughout the world as the "Water Capital" and was recognised as a city of great artistic value. The high walls that surrounded Dairan, however, were rough-hewn and inelegant, and the people who came and went from the city wore simple clothes. In Safia, men and women alike weaved their long hair into whatever complicated style they preferred, but here, that was rare.

In plain words, it was the sticks, and among the nobles that filled Safia, many mocked Dairan as a "remote frontier" and a "land of savages".

Walking through Dairan, everywhere you went, you would hear the yells of men training in the military arts, and under the eaves of the houses, you would frequently see women doing laundry or peeling vegetables.

Just then, the men, dripping with sweat, suddenly halted their arms that were swinging spears. The women, who had been trampling the spread-out laundry, also stopped the movement of their white legs, and the young girls hurriedly corrected their seating posture.

“Lord Eric,” voices called out all along the street, and Eric answered them with a smile.

The Second Prince always openly asserted that Dairan was his home. His personality was much closer to that of a warrior of the Plutos House than to one of Ende’s leading aristocrat; and on top of that, he had only recently exterminated the wild dragons that that had attacked Dairan. And so, the people there adored him.

When they heard that he had been chosen as the next Grand Duke, this rustic town, with its simple and unaffected creeds and its lingering scent of earth, was engulfed in three days and three nights of revelry, its people delirious with joy.

It did not even last ten days.

The people had particularly rejoiced at the fact that the future Grand Duke would be visiting Dairan. Eric, however, did not come to his “home” dressed in fine clothes for a triumphal return. Because they were well-aware of this, Dairan’s populace did not create more of a fanfare than necessary.

War was coming.

Moreover, it was not because of an attack by the nomadic tribes. The great eastern country of Allion had dispatched its troops; and far from there being any reason to celebrate, Dairan, or better said, Ende itself, was facing an unprecedented crisis.

Allion’s air carriers were already moored to the north of Ende, in the port city of Zonga. These were probably no more than an advance supply unit, but a force of two thousand led by Kaseria Jamil was said to currently be at sea.

Right now, all of Ende was focused on getting ready for the impending war. Eric had come to Dairan to prepare for when Allion’s troops would depart from northern Zonga, but he could not remain there indefinitely.

In the old days, all he needed to focus on when war was about to break out was the war itself. Back when he had fought the nomadic tribes or planned the invasion of Garbera, he would only worry about organising the troops, ensuring provisions, or various concerns related to weapons inspection or maintaining his comrades' morale.

Now however, Eric was the future Grand Duke. Other than the preparations directly involving battle, there was a pile of things he needed to attend to. Beyond the battlefield, he needed to extend his gaze to all of Ende and keep a close eye on the surrounding countries.

On top of that, although he had been nominated as the next Grand Duke upon the death of his father, it could not be said that he was standing on firm footing. Having spent more time in Dairan than in Safia, Eric felt considerably estranged from the leading figures who supported the country.

Naturally, he had no choice but to travel back and forth to the capital. He had arrived in Dairan just the day before yesterday, but would soon be returning to Safia.

Kaseria. Just how serious are you about taking Ende, you bastard? His enemy's true feelings and intentions were as yet impossible to know.

He had already obtained information that, while his older brother, Jeremie, had implored its help by claiming that "the descendants of the Magic Dynasty should be brought together," not all of Allion welcomed this situation which had given them a good pretext for invading Ende. Or rather, it seemed that only Allion's First Prince, Kaseria Jamil, was enthusiastic about this war.

Are they simply intending to demonstrate Allion's influence at the centre of the continent through one battle, or is Kaseria the vanguard, with Allion's entire army set to move after all?

At no point, while out in public, did Eric wipe off his forthright smile, but in the depths of night, alone in his bed, there was a distinct crease between his brows.

One of the reasons for that was that their last ray of hope – the response from the northern coastal countries – was slow to arrive. It had been almost ten days since they had sent a request for help by fast air carrier, but they had still received no answer.

Has Allion already gotten to them or are they like me, they don't know what Allion's real intention is?

It was the same for Garbera and Mephius as well. From intelligence sent by spies, he understood that problems had arisen in both of those countries. Forget about sending aid to Ende, it would not be strange if fighting were to break out between the two of them.

In the worst possible situation, Ende would have to confront Kaseria's troops alone and under the sole command of Eric, who had not yet even become ruler.

The enemy has two thousand at sea. There doesn't seem to have been any further activity in Allion's ports, and reinforcements probably wouldn't come by the overland route.

The country of Ryalide stretched out between Ende and Allion. Although militarily, it was only a small country, he did not believe that Allion would want to increase the number of its enemies on its way to Ende.

"In that case…"

They just needed to be prepared.

Eric dragged his sword near his pillow and fell asleep hugging its sheath. It was a habit he had developed over the last ten days.

Early the next morning, Eric awoke with his eyes wide open and headed out of the Plutos mansion. He was going to a well near the stable to wash his face. The elderly soldier guarding the stable looked sleepy, but he seemed surprised and stood at attention when he saw Eric. He was a long-time acquaintance from his childhood, and Eric grinned at him and stopped to exchange some idle chit-chat.

"Lord Eric," a voice called out then. It was not that of a soldier. Turning around, he saw two young sisters.

"Thil, Reen," Eric smiled as he said their names.

The two of them gave him deep bows. Bowing deeply to nobles was the custom in Ende, but as neither of them was ten years old yet, their movements were an exaggerated imitation of what adults did. The younger sister bent so far forward that her back was almost parallel to the ground.

They were the daughters of Darowkin Plutos, the eldest son of Kayness Plutos, the current head of the family. For Eric, who had spent so long in Dairan, Kayness was like

a second father to him, and so, he thought of the two little girls practically as his own nieces.

“You have risen very early, Prince,” Thil, the older sister, spoke with punctilious courtesy.



“You can’t call him ‘Prince’ anymore. Because he’s already become the Grand Duke,” Reen, the younger sister, pointed out.

Of the two sisters, the older often acted like a grown-up. And when Reen always took her up on any mistakes, Thil would then protest with faint tears in her eyes. Such was the relationship between them. Eric smiled involuntarily.

“Neither is wrong. I’m still a prince, but I also bear the duties of the next Grand Duke.”

“Right, you see, Reen. I wasn’t wrong after all.”

“That’s because adults always take Thil’s side.”

“I don’t want to fight in front of the prince. Go play over there. I’ll even lend you my doll.”

“Those are two different things!”

Reen galloped off, laughing. Even if she pretended to be an adult, she was still only seven years old. Her steps were always light, and she was always cheerful.

Left behind, her older sister, Thil, once again bowed towards Eric.

“Prince, will Dairan become a battlefield again?” She asked with a serious expression.

For all that she was young, she was a daughter of the Plutos House. There was no doubt that she had been quick to sense that a war was approaching, and that it would be harsher and more violent than usual. Eric’s expression also changed. He was a man who could not deceive anyone, not even children.

“I don’t plan to let that happen. But a good warrior prepares for every situation. All the men in Dairan are like that. If it does happen though, you have to protect your little sister Reen.”

“Yes,” Thil meekly nodded her head.

The same day, at dusk, they received new information from a reconnaissance party that had been sent to Zonga.

“The troops led by Prince Kaseria will apparently arrive at the port of Zonga the day after tomorrow.”

Is this it? Eric braced himself as all of Dairan came under grew tense. *Will they start by sending a messenger to keep the appearance of a just cause? Or is Kaseria so desperate for blood that he’ll advance regardless?*

Simply waiting did not suit his personality and his impatience was getting worse. He felt the impulse to sally forth and attack right now, however –

“The first thing you need to do is set your priorities, Lord Eric.” Kayness Plutos, the current lord of Dairan, spoke calmly. “Determine what is important and laugh off what is trivial. The ruler of a country and the commander of an army are two different things. It would be best to display composure and return to Safia for a while.”

“But, Sir Kayness…”

“Otherwise, the grandees in Safia will forget your face, Lord Eric,” Kaynes gave a soft chuckle. “First, there are things that need getting used to. Such as the mutual relationship between lord and retainer.”

Certainly, being away from the capital for too long also left Eric feeling anxious. Among the retainers who had remained at the palace, not a few of them had previously supported his brother, Jeremie. In order not to create an unfavourable atmosphere, and also for the sake of once more gathering information about the two countries of Mephius and Garbera, he conceded that he needed to return to Safia for a while.

Entrusting the command of the defence force to Kayness, Eric boarded an air carrier. Immediately upon arriving at Safia, he found another piece of information awaiting him.

“Allion’s second wave of troops?” Eric unconsciously repeated the contents out loud.

A second unit was crossing from the east by the overland route. The country of Ryalide should have been an obstacle to any military expedition, but it had apparently thrown

open all the barriers along its highways and was allowing a troop of three thousand of Allion's soldiers to pass through.

"Did they yield under pressure?"

If they did not comply, those troops could be used to set a small country like Ryalide ablaze – had that kind of threat been applied?

Eric, however, had genuinely believed that Allion would not push forward with that kind of violent diplomatic pressure. No matter how powerful a country was, displaying such a high-handed attitude was dangerous. One step wrong and they would induce a sense of impending crisis, which might lead their surroundings to spread an encircling net around Allion, which in turn would hinder them not only militarily, but would also disrupt their trade.

Which means…

Kaseria Jamil was serious?

Eric was aware of cold sweat trickling beneath his undershirt.

There might be more to follow. For now however, there were five thousand in all. If they focused on defence, that was by no means a difficult number to drive back.

Eric was aware of cold sweat trickling beneath his undershirt.

There might be more to follow. For now however, there were five thousand in all. If they focused on defence, that was by no means a difficult number to drive back.

Eric was still young. Whatever Allion's true intentions were, the cause of all this was his older brother, Jeremie. When their father, the Grand Duke, passed away, and the position of successor to the throne was snatched away by his younger brother, Jeremie had stolen and made off with the flag of the Magic Dynasty, then begged a powerful country, with which they had ancient ties, to send troops.

Therefore, looking at things from a different angle, this was basically a problem internal to Ende. And so, Eric also felt like having Ende sweep away that number of enemies all by itself, and showing Garbera, Mephius, as well as those coastal countries that were deliberately staying quiet, that 'there is a new Ende now'.

No, even more than to a group of foreigners, the ones that Eric felt the most strongly that way about was towards those retainers who still doubted his ability.



At that same time, west of Ende's borders, there was a young man who was facing the same kind of trouble as Eric was.

He was equally in a position where he was poised to shoulder the responsibility of an entire country, he could not fathom his opponent's real intentions, and he too was hesitant about what attitude to take.

The young man's name was Gil Mephius.

The reminder is not needed, but his real identity was that of Orba, a former gladiator.

He had only just taken the city of Nedain when an envoy from the emperor had come to see him in person. The message he carried was that: "Imperial Crown Prince Gil Mephius is invited to come to Solon."

Part 2

Just before seeing the imperial envoy, Orba had met with a different visitor. An unexpected guest, at that.

Late the previous night, a group had turned up in Nedain. All of them were young men. They were dressed in rags, but all were muscular and their speech was rough. The guards at the gate assumed that they were some of the bandits who normally caused chaos along the surrounding highways but who, hearing about the crown prince's victory, had decided to change jobs and had come to hire themselves out as mercenaries. However –

"Let me see the Imperial Crown Prince at once," the youth who seemed to be the leader airily said something inconceivable. "I'm an acquaintance of His Highness'," he insisted, his face dusty and slightly dirt-stained.

"How could a guy like you be acquainted with His Highness? If your mercenary applicants, go straight down this street, then at the end…"

"You're kind of dim, huh? I told you I want to see him right now. His Highness will rake you over the coals later, you know."

The gatekeepers were perplexed, but, just as when the former Imperial Guard Alnakk had visited the port city of Birac, Orba had given strict orders to be passed on to every single soldier – "It doesn't matter how trivial it is. If something catches your attention, report it to your superior." That posture had already been explained here in Nedain.

Even so, it had not been long since Gil Mephius had arrived in that town. In the end, the report did not reach him until the next day.

It was just after Orba had finished breakfast. When he heard the name by which the young men's leader had introduced himself, he suddenly seemed lost in thought.

"It appears that this morning as well, they barged their way to the front of the mansion," said the commander of the guards. "Should we send them away?"

"No, it seems interesting. I'll see him," Orba gave his permission.

On top of that, he announced that he would see him, just the two of them. People were

surprised, but seeing Gil's impish smile, they concluded that *it must be some kind of whim*. There was no longer anyone who called Imperial Crown Prince Gil Mephius a "fool" – at least not here in Nedain – but there was never any lack of people who judged him to be "eccentric."

The only one who objected was Pashir, who was currently ensuring Gil's personal safety virtually single-handedly, but when Orba whispered something in his ear, he immediately withdrew his comment.

A few minutes later, the young man was allowed into the room which had been ordered clear of people.

"Heya, things got really heavy back there," was the first thing that the very rough-and-tumble youth said upon entering. "That's a real load of hassle, even just to see an old friend. Oh well, can't be helped. You're the crown prince of Mephius now."

Sharp eyes and a characteristic aquiline nose. He was certainly an "old friend" – of Orba's, the boy from an arid valley.

Orba himself did not say a word, but the young man sat himself down on a sofa in the room without asking and continued talking excitedly.

"Sorry for being so late. Obviously, I've known about the rumours for a while now. That the crown prince of Mephius has risen in revolt against Emperor Guhl. And, also obviously, I'd figured that you were that Crown Prince. Same thing when I first heard about your death: I realised from the start that you'd definitely gone into hiding."

"..."

"But yeah, that's Orba for you: not satisfied with being a body-double, you started moving to take over the whole country. That really got my blood pumping. So I wanted to gather some people and rush over at once, but some of the soldiers at Birac's garrison might know my face. We kind of kicked up a lot of dust around there, you know? Just while I was wondering what to do, suddenly, Nedain had fallen. That was a chance not to be missed, so I just gathered a hundred and we came flying from the village."

The young man's name was Doug.

He was a year older than Orba, and in their childhood, they had spent their entire time

quarrelling with each other. They shared the same past of having had the Mephian general Oubary Bilan attack their birthplace. Separated for six years, the two of them had met once more in that same native area.

One as the body-double to the crown prince of Mephius.

The other as the leader of bandits who had sworn revenge on Mephius.

The interests and goals of the two of them were aligned, so they lured Oubary Bilan and his troops to the village, killed the soldiers who had fallen into their trap, and captured Oubary himself.

How much time had passed again since then?

Doug looked at Orba with a cheerful expression. At which point, Orba opened his mouth for the first time.

“Why are you here?”

“Why?” For a moment, Doug’s eyes opened round, then immediately afterwards, he laughed, showing his teeth. “Because isn’t it interesting, Orba? I thought that killing those nobles and generals still wouldn’t have been enough to bring satisfaction, but now every single one of them will become your retainers. They’ll obey your orders and offer their lives for you. The quarrelsome brat from that arid valley will become the great emperor of Mephius. What could be more interesting than that? Let me take part in it. An ally knowing your real identity could be useful in an emergency. Officially, of course, I’ll serve as your loyal subordinate. Heh, Orba, I’ll have to call you Crown Prince and even Emperor. Still…”

“*Who are you?*” Orba asked once more. He stared expressionlessly at Doug, who this time was at a loss for words. “Who are you, and who is this Orba whose name you keep using? Who have you been talking about since earlier?”

“I-I get it. I get it. I won’t call you Orba in public. Like I’ve been saying, officially…”

“Ah, I remember,” Orba said unsmilingly. “Aren’t you that bandit from back then? And? It’s true that I borrowed your help to defeat Oubary so have you come to extort a reward? What is it you want: money or women? Just say what you’d like.”

“Wh-What did you say?” Suddenly bursting with anger, Doug got up from the sofa and

drew up towards Orba. “Come to extort you? Bullshit. Oi, don’t push it, Orba.”

“I told you that I don’t know that name.” Orba spoke with complete calm, the exact opposite of Doug, whose entire body seemed to be burning like a ball of fire. He took the sword that was at his waist. “Leave at once and never appear before me again. If you defy me, Peasant, know that I’ll throw not just you but also your family and everyone close to you to the fire. Do you understand?”

More than the threats, more than the gleam of the sword taken from its sheath, what caused Doug’s body to freeze instantly was because from up close, there was no trace of warmth in his gaze. Those eyes truly seemed to be looking at a complete stranger, and moreover, they were looking down in utter contempt at the young man whose position was so clearly different from his own.

Orba clapped his hands and summoned Pashir, the only guard he had allowed to remain outside the door.

“Take him away,” he ordered. “Afterwards, have the guards memorise his face. If he shows up again around here, then too bad, he’s to be cut down without mercy.”

“Aye,” answered Pashir, and, seizing Doug by the arm, he forced him to leave.

Although having said that, Doug showed no signs of resisting. He looked towards Orba one last time, but Orba’s attention had already moved on to the documents on the desk.

The door closed.

Left alone, Orba stayed a while without stirring. Inwardly, however, he murmured, Doug? Maybe he had been dreaming.

Not Doug, for aiming to go up in life – Orba himself.

Now, just before the point when he was about to step on a tightrope from which he could no longer look back, a nostalgic and familiar face had appeared before him, bringing with it the warmth of his home village.

After that, he could have treated him to a drink, and they could have laughed together, reminiscing about old times.

Or else, he could have clapped him on the shoulder, saying, “it’s a real help that you came,” then, with that shoulder to rely on, they could have crossed the tightrope together.

Orba however did neither of those things. Doug was one of those who knew his real identity. You could even call him a person who could affect his fate. The thought even flitted across his mind that as a last resort he could secretly kill him.

But –

I don’t know anyone called Doug.

Orba had played dumb.

Since he did not know him, he had sent him away out of hand; since he did not know him, he would not pay any attention to his existence.

That was just a dream.

Picking up the sword that he had, for a moment, placed on the desk, Orba gave a small, an ever so small, sigh.

Orba had posted soldiers throughout Nedain and had also personally gone to its outskirts and had them take up defensive positions. This was because they were in a situation in which they did not know when the emperor might dispatch a subjugation force. The circumstances, however, were different than what they had been in Apta or in Birac. In both of those towns, the people’s faces had been tinged with the worry that they might get swallowed up in a large-scale conflict. In Nedain’s case, on the other hand, having just been released from the oppression of the Abigoal family, both the people and the soldiers were full of fighting spirit and were ready to drive away any enemy that might come.

It was at such a time that the emperor’s envoy arrived.

Moreover, he brought not an order demanding that the impostor claiming to be the crown prince deliver up his own head, but an invitation for the “Gil Mephius” who was currently in Nedain to enter Solon, on the grounds that his identity had been thoroughly recognised.

Their side was in turmoil.

If the emperor had sent a host of ten thousand against them, the crown prince's soldiers gathered in Nedain, as well as its people would, as stated earlier, probably have united as one. But the emperor had clearly 'backed down'. Perhaps he had realised that the momentum from the crown prince's side could no longer be stemmed and had grown timid; but, even more than the conviction that they could win, what this had brought was the hope that they would be able to avoid any more useless fighting.

They no longer needed to fight and spill the blood of fellow Mephians. Once that thought emerged, even ever so fleetingly, the wish for peace would easily erode the will to fight, and people's opinions would come to be divided.

And naturally, among those opinions –

"It's a trap."

There was also the one that Rogue Saian had just expressed.

In Nedain Castle, the main officers from the crown prince's side were gathered in the rectangular room that had once served as Jairus Abigoal's office.

"I cannot believe that His Majesty would change his mind so suddenly. There is no doubt that this is a trap designed to cause unrest in our camp."

"Definitely," Odyne Lorgo agreed. "And in fact, having heard about it, the emotions of the soldiers and the people are swaying. While there are those who are saying that His Majesty is planning to have His Highness assassinated, just as back then in Birac, there are others who claim that to avoid civil war, the crown prince should allow himself to be persuaded to go to Solon."

"And as soon as the invitation is accepted, His Highness will be captured and executed, without being given a chance to explain or vindicate himself. While we, of course, will be denounced as traitors who supported an impostor."

"As His Majesty is now, he might just do that."

"Having said that," Folker Baran interrupted in a soft tone that yet managed to cut through everyone else, "if he refuses His Majesty's invitation without a good reason,

His Highness will lose the moral high ground."

Rogue maintained a sullen silence. What had just been pointed out was not something that he had not thought of before. And naturally, Orba shared Folker's concerns.

Up until now, the emperor had decisively dispatched soldiers against the impostor. Gil Mephius' cause had become attacking Guhl, presented as "a statesman who does not listen to others". However, now that he had recognised the prince and had officially summoned him, just as Folker had said, if he refused without a reason that the whole could accept as legitimate, Gil would turn into a traitor bent on devastating the land. And again, naturally, this was no doubt one of the aims on Guhl's side.

It was for the same reason that he had once left Salamand Fogel to do as he pleased.

Both Rogue and Odyne understood it. Or better said, the "trap" spoken of earlier included that meaning.

"In any case, attending an audience in Solon is too dangerous. We cannot let Your Highness go through with it."

"Should we send an envoy too?"

"We could suggest a conference somewhere at equal distance between Solon and Nedain."

"No, that wouldn't be practical."

The discussion showed no sign of ending.

Orba had the meeting adjourned for the time being. In the end, he had barely expressed any opinion of his own. However, those who, starting with Rogue, had decided to serve the crown prince were getting used to the personality of their new lord. When he did not say anything, it was because Gil Mephius was deep in thought. At the same time, and while looking entirely expressionless and uninterested, he would carefully listen to his subordinates' opinions.

And so, everyone stood to attention to see Gil out without a trace of grumbling or discontent. They could not, however, completely conceal their anxiety and concern about the future.

Orba left the building.

Pashir followed so close behind him that they were almost stuck together. He had also been at the meeting but, like Orba, he had not expressed an opinion. His purpose was purely to be Gil's guard.

Normally, Orba would irritably shake him off, but now, there had been the incident in Birac. If Pashir had not been there to pay attention to the surroundings, Orba would have died under an assassin's blade. Although he seemed gloomy about it, Orba could not therefore outright order Pashir to go away.

Pashir suddenly pushed Orba aside and stepped out to stand in front of him.

"What is it?" He barked as three soldiers rushed forward towards them.

They were all different ages, but from their equipment, they seemed to be soldiers serving at Nedain Castle. They all knelt together.

"Please forgive our rudeness, Your Imperial Highness," the grey-haired soldier breathlessly spoke first. "Everyone is talking about it. That for the sake of we soldiers and of the people, and to avoid war, you intend to go to Solon."

"I-If you go, His Majesty the emperor will have you killed," the young and pale-faced soldier said, following which, the soldier in the prime of life cried with a desperately resolute expression – "Please, if you would, stay here and govern Nedain. All of us are ready to offer our lives to defend you as Your Highness' spears and shields."

Pashir quite literally kicked aside their hands, which seemed about to reach out towards Orba's boots any moment now.

"Get back, you insolent curs. The likes of you lowly soldiers dare to interfere?"

"Wait, Pashir." Orba quietly caught his massive shoulder. He then bestowed a smile upon the soldiers. "This is proof that everyone is thinking about the future of this country. I am different from my father. I wish to create a country in which everyone can express their opinions without reserve."

"Aye," Pashir drew back.

Orba turned to the soldiers next and spoke directly to them. “I don’t plan on giving up my without resistance. Don’t worry.”

The soldiers lowered their heads as far as they could go. You could sense resolve from each of them, and the older soldier had been moved to tears.

Afterwards, Orba and Pashir climbed up to the top of the ramparts that surrounded Nedain. Sentries were placed on duty here and there, but they were some distance from them.

While enjoying the gentle wind beneath the pale sky, Orba sent Pashir a sidelong glare.

“Don’t force yourself into an act you can’t pull off.”

“You’re the one who got me mixed up in it. It felt like my face was going red.”

“Everyone’s uneasy. If the prince’s attitude isn’t seen to be indomitable, it could create enemies from within.”

Pashir had deliberately taken the role of a savage warrior who could not understand the feelings of the common people.

“It doesn’t suit you,” Orba shook his head. “If it comes to it, I’ll look for a better role for you. You’re a gladiator who climbed up to being an Imperial Guard. It’d be a problem rather if you didn’t have the support of the people and soldiers.”

“Hmm,” Pashir gave a vague nod then. “Was it that bad?” He asked with a serious expression.

Orba turned his head towards the back to stop himself from laughing. A man who was a skilful fighter and an able commander in a battle, but who was not deft by nature; hence why he felt that it *didn’t suit*. As to who that was referring to, it went without saying.

They climbed down from the ramparts and inspected various points around Nedain. Just before the afternoon, messengers arrived from different quarters, carrying the regular reports from Apta, Birac and Solon. There was no noteworthy new information. According to what he heard from Solon, however, there was a rumour that Kaseria Jamil’s forces would soon arrive at the port of Zonga, north of Ende.

Ende had recently lost its Grand Duke and it was the second prince, Eric, who was to become the successor. When he had first heard that information, not even Orba had been able to conceal his surprise.

That guy?

He had fought him in Garbera's territory. And afterwards, they had met along with the Garberan prince, Zenon.

He's young – he thought, without actually taking his own age into account. Still, in these turbulent times, there was nothing strange about a young warrior in his twenties becoming a reigning lord from one day to the next.

If it's him, will he be able to lead Ende's army against Allion?

There was a sequel to the information from Solon: it seemed that Prince Eric of Ende had sent messengers begging Mephius and Garbera for reinforcements. So far, Emperor Guhl had given no sign of replying. Which could be said to be completely natural, given that Mephius was in the middle of a civil war that had split the country in half. They did not have the leeway to help other countries.

There was still more information related to Allion.

Apparently, Allion was approaching Dairan not only by sea, but also overland. Just as Eric had when he had received the news, Orba could not hide his astonishment and groaned inwardly.

When he closed his eyes, it felt as though he could hear the tramping of army boots coming from the east. This was not going to be a transient event.

There'll be a large-scale war – he felt.

If even just a part of Ende were to be seized, Allion would then have foothold from which to launch an all-out advance on the centre of the continent. The surrounding countries could not indefinitely continue labelling this as someone else's problem.

With that being said, Mephius and Garbera had yet to recover from the wounds of a decade of war. Would they be able to withstand a war between countries?

No matter what, Eric has to win this first battle against Allion – thought Orba, while he

mentally sorted out the information from all the various quarters. If it was for that, he would even consider lending his help by riding to Ende's assistance himself. But – first, there was Mephius.

Ende's assistance himself. But – first, there was Mephius.

They could not afford a long face-off, like they had after taking Birac. Prolonging the civil war would cause ruin for the people. And if the country was weakened, it would not be able to oppose the increasingly large and carnivorous beast that was Allion. The end result would be that they would be swallowed up, and even the titles of emperor and crown prince, held by the two currently competing, would lose all meaning.

While Orba silently continued to mull over his thoughts, the messenger from Birac held out a letter, saying, "Sir Gowen entrusted me with this."

The elderly soldier had remained in Birac, where he was organising troops consisting mainly of the new recruits.

His acquaintance with Gowen went back a long way, but this was the first time he had received a letter from him. To be frank, he did not even know if Gowen could read and write. When he unsealed the letter, he saw handwriting about as bad as his own. A wry smile involuntarily crossed his face, but as he read the contents, his expression quickly reverted back to being serious.

"What's wrong?" Asked Pashir, who was, as usual, sticking close by. "Has there been some kind of movement in Birac?"

"No… It's about Layla."

The name was not without relevance to Pashir. He nodded with deliberation.

She who was supposed to be a lady's maid to Princess Vileena of Garbera had, one evening, lured Crown Prince Gil to an isolated tower and had attempted to kill him with a poisoned dagger. In the process, she had also ushered in quite a few of her comrades. As mentioned previously, if Pashir had not been keeping a close eye on the prince and on Layla, Orba would currently be laid out as a cold corpse.

And yet, at the very last minute, that same Layla had thrown herself in front of him to protect from the assassins' blades.

Layla.

It was a name that Orba had heard even before then. On the very day of her wedding, the crown prince before Orba – in other words, the real Gil Mephius – had claimed the right to the first night from her. He had certainly never expected to meet her like that.

To be more precise, they had met for the first time in a western village. What had a Mephian like her been doing there and how had she come to work as a lady's maid for the princess?

There were too many puzzling points about it.

More importantly, Orba instinctively sensed that any information she had about the crown prince might prove fatal to him.

Out of necessity, Orba had decided to keep Layla confined in a room in the tower. There had been the option of executing her as the instigator of the assassination attempt, but she was also someone who had once been a lady's maid to the Garberan princess. He wanted to try and get a detailed explanation from her.

It seemed, however, that Gowen shared his opinion about the threat posed by whatever information Layla might have.

"Given the circumstances, we've kept the number of guards at the minimum, but I believe that we can't continue that way," said the letter. It then went on to suggest that she be executed.

For a moment, Orba was left speechless by the appealing contents of the note. He felt as though he was seeing a different side to his long-time acquaintance. It was probably not Gowen's real wish though. In a way, it was similar to the resolve that Orba himself carried.

You'll have to bear the burden of an entire country while deceiving everyone around you – That also meant being prepared to use any means necessary to protect his secret.

Orba conjured up a mental image of the elderly warrior who had always seemed to, more or less, look out for him ever since back when he had been an overseer of slaves. After adopting Hou Ran, he had been giving off a somewhat "fatherly" atmosphere, which had given Orba and Shique a good laugh.

And he was suggesting that it might be necessary to kill a girl who was around the same age as his “daughter” in order to seal her mouth. This too was a distortion caused by Orba – by the likes of a slave of unknown origin – pretending to be the crown prince.

Orba tore up the letter and went back to the ramparts once again. Pashir silently followed along.

Part 3

The sun was setting.

Fields spread out both within and beyond the ramparts. The soil around Nedain was not particularly fertile, but through effort and ingenuity, the people of the fief had continuously improved it; and so, for example, the grapes from this area were contenders for producing the first or second best wine within Mephius.

Lines of soldiers armed with spears and swords could be seen patrolling around the fields. Airships were dotted around here and there, ready to swiftly carry information. Carriers were also stationed at all four corners of the ramparts.

Orba's gaze suddenly turned towards the east. For a while, he looked hard beyond the pale pink sky.

"How long has it been?"

At those words, which had unintentionally burst from his mouth, Orba felt as though he was seeing clear to his own mind for the first time. Before Pashir could enquire what he meant, he continued, "right, it's not like it's got nothing to do with you. Ever since Zaat Quark's rebellion. When I prevented it and left for Apta with you."

"Are you talking about Solon?" Pashir asked. "You can't possibly be thinking of responding to the emperor's invitation?"

"You were also listening at the council of war, weren't you? If I stay like this without making a move, I'll damage my cause and be letting Allion do whatever they please. Apta, Birac, and Nedain would eventually turn against me. The result would just be me bringing about my own ruin. And besides…"

"Besides?"

"Allion is obviously a threat to Mephius but… this could also be taken as a once in a lifetime 'opportunity'."

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"Besides?"

"Allion is obviously a threat to Mephius but… this could also be taken as a once in a lifetime 'opportunity'."

Orba was saying that being pressed by Allion meant being helplessly cornered into destroying a favourable situation. And yet, he declared that it was also an "opportunity". Pashir could not understand his thoughts.

He did not understand, but –

"You're not saying that you're planning on just handing over your life, right?" There was one thing that he single-mindedly could not let go of.

"I'm not planning on going there to let myself be killed."

"Same thing. Have you forgotten the assassination attempt in Birac? It's obvious the emperor had a hand in it."

"Now that he's openly summoned me, he won't be thinking of using assassination."

"Don't be stupid," yet a smile flitted across Pashir's slightly bruised and battered face. "Hasn't the emperor of Mephius lost touch with common sense? That's why people like General Rogue or General Folker are willing to follow you."

"Yeah. But somehow, I feel like I understand."

"You understand?"

"What Guhl was thinking when he summoned me."

At this point, the emperor was probably feeling that they had reached a stalemate. Mephius' centre of trade had been stolen from him and, following closely on the heels of that defeat, his loyal subject, Simon, had died, which in turn had started to sow dissent among his retainers. The emperor had then been unable to dispatch the reinforcements he had planned to send to Nedain, as a result of which, even that town had fallen to the crown prince's side. Assassination – his last resort – had also failed, and he could no longer use the same method for fear of rumours spreading to Solon.

In terms of the military potential that each held, the emperor still had the advantage. However, a 'wind' which was not so easy to overturn was blowing throughout all of Mephius. It had been raised by Orba himself who had successively taken Apta, Birac, and Nedain; it had been supported by Rogue, Odyne and Folker, who had aided his advance; and finally, it had been protected by Princess Vileena, who had turned back Salamand, an invader into Mephian territory.

In a way, from when he had decided to rise up as the crown prince in Apta, what Orba had set his sights on was – *how can I stir up more 'wind' and 'waves'?* For now, it could be said that he had accomplished that goal.

And the emperor desired a meeting with Gil simply because he could no longer afford to ignore that influence. *Since things have turned out this way, I should meet him in person and show the retainers our difference in might* – was probably what he was thinking.

In a sense, it would be a duel.

"You say you understand?" Pashir spoke half in exasperation. "What do you understand? You weren't born to royalty and Guhl's not your real father. In the first place, you're not even that well-acquainted with Guhl."

Orba deliberately did not answer. Just as Pashir had pointed out, the environment in which Orba and Guhl had been born and raised were as different as heaven and earth. It was a fact that they were fighting like this simply because their thoughts and their vision of the future were at odds.

Yet even so, Orba felt that – *I would think the same thing if I was in Guhl's situation*.

Neither moving troops nor killing in secret. In a situation where the wind was blowing in the enemy's favour daily, and Allion, a powerful outside foe, was approaching, he too would want a direct confrontation. He also would, after baiting the newcomer

jeopardising his position, use the authority of his own accumulated achievements and experience, in front of the assembled retainers, to verbally corner his opponent.

The final gamble – he too shared that thought.

For all that he said that it was great opportunity, he privately thought that his own strength might not be enough. Beyond that, he could only leave things to the 'wave' that he had himself raised. The messenger that Guhl had sent proved that he had successfully managed to move 'time'. It was time to see the conclusion through with his own eyes.

"Don't be stupid," repeated Pashir. "You think the retainers, who've shut their eyes to Guhl's tyranny this long, are suddenly going to awaken to a sense of honour? That the nobles that you used to hate enough to kill are now going to protect you from the emperor? That soft way of thinking isn't like you."

"Guess not," Orba answered shortly, then laughed unintentionally. He thought it had been a long time since his gladiator self had been in contact with Pashir. "But you know, Pashir… The ones who carry a country are its people. Is it really so foolish to entrust your life and future to those people's feelings?"

"I didn't say that."

"I won't go unprepared. Even if something happens to me, I'll get ready what's needed to prevent a war between Mephius and the west, and to drive the emperor further into a corner."

Orba's expression looked strangely refreshed. With the fervour for fighting gone from it, his appearance truly matched his age and he looked like a boy who had thought up a way of pulling a silly prank. It seemed to just fan the flames of Pashir's anger though.

"If something happens," the long-serving swordsman's voice grew harsh. "When anything happens to you, it'll mean ruin for all the rest of us. For the generals and soldiers who joined you because they believe in you, obviously, but also for their families who'll be put in danger again."

"I know. And it's a gamble. But no matter what, we can't stay in a stand-off with the capital like this. I've already said it, but if we draw things out now, we'll lose the moral high ground and allow Allion to do whatever it likes. I chose to go to war with the emperor so as to protect Taúlia. This time, I've got to go to Solon to protect Mephius.

It’s the same thing.”

“It’s not the same thing. There’s got to be another way.”

“Pashir, this isn’t a fight which will be over once the emperor has been brought down. Looking at what happens after that, then no matter what…”

“It’s too dangerous. For everyone. So I can’t let you carry on like that. ‘No matter what’.”

His expression still harsh, Pashir started to draw the sword at his waist. His intention was clear. Orba however made no move in response. He gave a half-smile.

“And, what are you going to do? Kill me? You’re the one who said that everyone will be annihilated if I die, right?”

“Yeah, I won’t kill you. But I can cut off your arms and legs so that you can’t just do as you please,” said Pashir. “And after that, I’ll pull your tongue out. So that you won’t be able to say too much afterwards.”

“…”

Hearing the stern verdict, Orba wiped the amused expression from his face. Pashir was saying that he only needed to be alive. He was saying that the crown prince’s figure and life alone were enough to be a flag for those who followed him.

Pashir continued his now half-unsheathed sword. “What is it. Not saying anything? Don’t you have enough resolve to step over my corpse?”

“Pashir.”



Orba softly called out. He quietly stretched out his hand and touched Pashir's sinewy, log-like arm. He had once been known as "Strong-armed", an undefeated gladiator.

"I'm going," Orba was almost whispering. "If you have things you want to protect enough to step over my corpse to do so, then you can just slash me in the back. I won't resist."

After he had finished speaking, he turned his back towards Pashir.

He walked one step, then two.

Behind him, he could feel Pashir's presence like a scorching wind. Any moment now, it might transform into steel and rain down on Orba from above.

Right, this is the final gamble – thought Orba, as he continued to walk further and further away.

In the distance, he could hear what seemed to be the voices of young men and women singing a popular song.

If I can't move 'time' from here on out, nothing will change.

He and Mephius would perish together… In choosing to see things that way, Orba was urging on his own resolve and actions.

His feet arrived at the staircase. The presence was still there, ferocity rolling like flames from it, but, in the end, Pashir had not moved from where he was.

Just before the sun had finished fully setting, Orba, having left Pashir, went to see Fedom, who had arrived in Nedain just the other day. Nedain was geographically closer to the capital and the lord of Birac was desperate to gather information there.

"A letter came from Indolph." Fedom's tone made clear his pride in this achievement. "It looks like that man will soon have resolved himself to finally take action. It'll be exactly as I said. When Indolph's forces also make their move, and threaten the capital from the rear, the other lords will have no choice but to clarify their standpoint."

Fedom Aulin's eyes were gleaming. The long-cherished desire that he had concealed

in his breast was now right before his eyes; and in his current frame of mind, he felt as though he was conscious when sleeping, and dreaming when awake.

Actually, it was clear from his appearance that he was hardly sleeping at all. And because he was in that state, when he first heard Orba say "even so, I'm thinking of leaving here tomorrow and going to the capital," after first gaping at him, Fedom then burst out laughing as though he had just heard a good joke.

But when it gradually dawned on him that Orba was serious, his face flushed bright red with rage. His ferocity was every bit as intense as Pashir's, who had drawn a steel sword to stop Orba, and it seemed as though, at any moment, he might reach out his thick arms to seize him by the neck and strangle him to death.

"T-This is the limit," Fedom screamed, wheezing and gasping for breath. "I'm not letting you do whatever you like, you bastard. What do you think you're saying at this point? You can't just do whatever you like right before my greatest ambition comes true! Bah, I won't listen to anything more you say. You're not going even if I have to tie you down!"

"Now, now, calm down."

You're the one trying to do whatever you like – thought Orba, although he did not actually say it out loud.

"I don't think it would bad for you, though."

"W-What?"

"Your worry is that after I nonchalantly stroll into the capital, my real identity will be exposed and I'll be killed, right?"

"Of course it is. If your past as a gladiator became known at this point in time, not only would you lose your life, but all the resolve and expectations gathered around you would all come to nothing!"

"I wonder…" Orba brushed his hair back. "Saying that everything would be spoiled seems like such an exaggeration."

"Bastard, what are you saying, even now you're not taking your position into…"

"Even if I died, *you're* in the crown prince's camp, aren't you? You, Fedom Aulin."

“W-What?”

Orba faced the lord of Birac, who was blinking in confusion.

“Apta, Birac, Nedain. Even if I die, their strength won’t just abruptly fall to the emperor’s side. On the contrary, if you raise the cry for a war of revenge for the crown prince, even more soldiers than now will gather, and it might even give rise to conspirators within Solon itself. Right – after the crown prince’s death, all the soldiers assembled in the three cities would become yours.”

“…”

“And the hero who would take command of that entire army to take Solon and at long last liberate Mephius from the unjust emperor would be none other than you, Fedom Aulin. That could be what happens.”

Fedom gulped. Having swallowed too much of his own saliva, he was seized by a brief but violent coughing fit.

“R-Ridiculous,” his eyes were still teary. “If your real identity is revealed in the capital, that’ll be the end of it. Who would rally to a war of revenge for the likes of a slave?”

“There are as many possible explanations as you like. For example: ‘to show his contempt for the crown prince who had become a threat to him, the emperor deliberately had him murdered then branded his back so as to lie about his real identity.’ After that, well, Fedom, you’re a guy who’s usually proud of your own abilities. Wouldn’t you be able to convince everyone to follow you through your words and attitude? The emperor’s cruel and inhuman behaviour would be highlighted even further than before my death, and would actually make it easier to take action. You of all people aren’t going to tell me that’s impossible, right?”

Fedom was still breathing raggedly, but the reason for that seemed to be somewhat different from earlier. He peered closely into Orba’s face.

“You said ‘even further than before my death’…? You’re talking exactly as though you didn’t care in the slightest about your own life.”

“Wasn’t I originally picked up by you? If you hadn’t appeared at Tarkas’ Gladiator Group back then, riding a Tengo in such a great hurry – back when it wouldn’t have occurred to me for even a second that you had the outrageous plan of using a slave to

replace the crown prince – I would still be wielding a sword every day as a gladiator, drenched in sweat and fighting desperate, bloody battles. Or no, after close to two years of that, maybe my devil's luck would already have run out and the sand of the coliseum would be absorbing my blood around about now."

"…"

"Say, this is getting tedious: forget my enemies, I'm even being doubted by my allies. More importantly, it would be best for you to take action. Isn't that right? Lord Fedom?"

Orba gazed almost affectionately at the man in front of him. Right, as a matter of fact, he did feel affection for this man, Fedom Aulin.

Just as he himself had said, if this man had not existed, he himself would not be where he was now.

If this man was smarter than he actually is, or even just a little bit less prudent… Then that overly-ambitious plan would have collapsed in no time, and Orba and Fedom's severed heads would have been lining the road to Solon by now, each adorning the tip of a spear.

Although, of course, there would be no end to it if one were to discuss that sort of thing. If, at that time, his prediction had been off even by a little; if, at that time, he had not met that person; if, at that time, the sword had slipped in his sweaty hands…

Out of the tens of thousands of possible paths, the he who was here now had picked only one to follow to the end.

Orba engraved that awareness into his mind.

That evening, Orba summoned Rogue, Odyne, and Folker to Nedain Castle.

It took him about twice as long to explain the same thing that he had told Pashir. General Rogue of the Dawnlight Wings Division opposed it with the vehemence of a raging fire. General Odyne of the Silver Axe Division revealed a distressed and conflicted expression, while General Folker of the Black Steel Sword Division remained silent from beginning to end.

“Y-Your Highness, that is the one thing… the one thing you must not do,” Rogue Saian repeated it time and time again.

In that, it was similar to the times with Pashir and Fedom. Naturally, Orba had not been expecting them to just silently see him off. He listened to the veteran general’s spirited persuasion for a while, then –

“Rogue,” he addressed him softly. “What do you think is the one thing that we cannot lose sight of in this fight of ours?”

“That…” Rogue Saian’s voice choked up, “the banner that we raised.”

“Right. And that is not me myself,” asserted Orba. “It isn’t me but the cause that impels me to take action. If the hearts of the people doubt our cause, then we are already as good as defeated. We will be letting Guhl Mephius ridicule us without even putting up a fight, and we will bear the disgrace of being remembered in history, I as the Impostor Crown Prince, and you as rebels.”

The generals had not, of course, imagined that the crown prince would choose of his own free will to travel to the imperial capital.

At the same time, however, the three of them were not as inflexible in their opposition to his going to Solon as Pashir and Fedom had been. After all, none of Mephius’ stalwart generals knew the real name of the man before them. They believed that he was the legitimate inheritor of the imperial family’s bloodline, Gil Mephius. And so, at no point had they experienced the fear that Pashir and Fedom held about his real identity being exposed.

“This is no longer the time to raise our swords against our fellow countrymen. It’s been a harsh road up until now because of that. From now on, what we need to do is to demonstrate our resolve. Rogue, don’t take me for a plague-ridden coward. Don’t take me for a mere fool who continues to make a show of savage courage without knowing how to read the signs of the times. Don’t take me for a criminal who continues to spill the blood of his countrymen. Well, there’s no helping whatever future historians might say, but now, here and now, here and now, we cannot lose the hearts and trust of the people.”

Rogue’s eyes were glistening with tears. He was, of course, well able to read the signs of the times. Up until now, he had been desperately racking his brains to try and come up with a way to improve the situation other than by having the crown prince

personally go to Solon. However, no matter what new plan or strategy he came up with, he could not find in it that which Gil Mephius himself had just spoken of: the very "cause" that Rogue also adhered to.

In the end, he had no choice but to despairingly nod in consent.

Gazing at his despondently drooping head of white hair, Orba remained deliberately expressionless, then rose from his seat.

"Rogue, Odyne, Folker – you will stay here in Nedain and ensure its defence along with Raymond Peacelow. Yuriah's fleet, bolstered by Walt's ground forces, will regroup in Birac."

The generals stood up and clicked their heels before the "Crown Prince".

Chapter 2
In Mephius' Imperial Capital

Part 1

When they heard that the emperor had apparently summoned the crown prince to the imperial capital, the people's reaction was split in two:

"His Majesty has finally recognised His Highness Gil."

"No, he's surely planning to have him arrested and executed once he arrives at the capital."

The arguments were carried out both surreptitiously and in loud voices. There were not many, however, who clearly supported one option or the other.

The greatest concern for the people was – *how long will the civil war continue?* Or, in other words, for how long would they need to fear the destructions of war, how long would high taxes be levied, would the men be conscripted as soldiers – those kinds of concerns.

Naturally, there were different opinions among them. There were those who felt that as long as the current reign ensured the country's peace, then they did not care about the circumstances of those at the top. There were also many who felt uneasy about the emperor's recent behaviour – invading a neighbouring country with a cause that even those around him felt to be unconvincing, attempting to execute his retainers and their family – and who worried that even once the civil war was over, the signs of trouble would continue to loom large.

Amongst the tangle of information, there was also some about Princess Vileena. This was because, in the port-city of Birac, Gowen and the others had taken the initiative of spreading rumours. Although they had managed to avoid a serious deterioration of popular sentiment towards Garbera, thanks to the news that the princess had captured the intruder, Salamand, the princess herself was said to have returned to her home country.

Incidentally, Salamand, the ringleader of the affair, was said to currently be held in a dungeon in Solon, although only a very limited number of people knew of his exact whereabouts. Although it was doubtful whether he even still breathed, rumour suspected that he was being kept alive on the emperor's orders, as he had now become an important bargaining piece with Garbera.

In any case, a wide variety of confused reports continued to circulate and, even in Solon, the emperor's core domain, the people could not hide their anxiety.

There was only one exception.

"The Garberan princess has finally understood her own situation," gloated Empress Melissa when she heard that the princess had been returned to Garbera.

Her ladies' maids were helping the Empress change into new clothes. Once the clothes had all been put on, there were the ornaments and hairstyle to tend to, so they were busily going about their work making fresh preparations for these. In the midst of that, the topic of Princess Vileena had been brought up.

"Regardless who tries to twist the truth and how, the former imperial crown prince is no longer part of this world. Since her intended fiancé is no more, Princess Vileena no longer has any place in this country either. Given her boundless willfulness, it seems that she was never someone who could adjust to the strict life in our Mephian court, so you could say that each has found their own place."

Melissa's attitude towards everyone was gentle. That had remained the same even after she ascended to the position of Empress.

However –

"That is… about His Highness the Crown Prince," one of the ladies' maids standing behind the Empress and holding up a mirror spoke in a low voice. "Is the rumour that His Majesty invited him to Solon really true? If it turns out to be true that His Highness is alive, and, moreover, with his having waged war on His Majesty…"

"That is not the crown prince!"

Melissa's voice was sharp enough to cut. The lady's maid suddenly stiffened and almost seemed about to drop the mirror. Gazing at the pale face across the mirror's surface, Melissa went back to smiling.

“Did I not only just finish saying so?”

“Ah, y-yes.”

“His Majesty is following his own thoughts. Do not trouble yourself with that low person who is senselessly raising a fuss.”

In fact, the one who had reacted the most sensitively to the news that a person claiming to be the crown prince had appeared was none other than Melissa herself.

And yet, ever since the Garberan princess had returned to her home country, she seemed to have completely lost interest in the matter. It was as though the Impostor Crown Prince had never existed in the first place.

Before the evening, Melissa went to visit the Dragon Gods’ shrine. Being deeply devout, she paid homage at the shrine every day without fail. Wearing the hooded cloak that the emperor had distributed to all of his retainers for the ceremony marking the erection of the shrine, she left the soldiers who were acting as her guards at the entrance and proceeded alone into the shrine’s interior.

One of the elders came to welcome her. His filthy appearance suggested that it had been a long time since he had bathed in warm water, but Melissa’s brows did not so much as twitch, and she met him with the greatest possible respect.

“First of all, nothing could be better than that you successfully removed the hindrance.”

“With that, the ‘diagnosis’ should have changed, should it not?”

“Please be at ease. Mephius is moving in a better direction. Ever since the moment when you drew Emperor Guhl to us, the foundations for the ‘land of destiny’ have steadily continued to be consolidated. Indeed, Mephius will unmistakable be guided by your own hand, Empress.”

Beneath the hood, Melissa smiled as bashfully as a young girl whose friend had just pointed out that she was in love for the first time.

“Then, with regards to that matter…”

“Ah yes, that Imperial Guard who accompanied the princess. He was called Tanis, was

it? *That* too was destiny's guiding hand. And he has safely completed his sacred mission. His fate has now already run its course and he will be awaiting us in the promised land."

Melissa gave a slight nod. She appeared satisfied, but her eyebrows then suddenly contracted in concern.

"This is somewhat abrupt of me, but, of late, I have not seen that Esteemed One at the shrine. Today also, I had thought to give him my greetings and went to call on him, but…"

"Hmm," even though there was no one around, the elder lowered his voice a little. "It has been more than half a century since that Esteemed One has taken his 'current appearance'. The longer the time to grow accustomed, the better the circulation of ether becomes, but that Esteemed One is naturally subject to the laws of one's allotted lifespan, and so a long passage of time produces various impediments."

"Will he be safe?"

"It is nothing serious. That Esteemed One is constantly enduring pain. He gazes at a world far wider than that which our insignificant selves can see, and he guides a great many destinies. That is similar to spending every second bearing pain sharp enough to slice through one's body."

"Indeed."

The Empress gave a deep bow then left the shrine.

That evening, Melissa had planned to eat dinner with her two daughters. However, when she arrived at the spacious dining room reserved for the use of nobles, only her second daughter, Flora, was there, with her eldest, Ineli, nowhere to be seen.

When she asked the ladies' maids about it, it came out that Ineli had recently been attending all sorts of engagements. She was frequently absent as she attended parties, art exhibitions, recitals, or received the greetings from foreign envoys and all manner of events.

"Daughters at that age are so vexing," Melissa lamented. The ladies' maids waiting on table were setting down an amount of food that two women alone could not possibly finish. "In that respect, I am saved by the fact that you listen obediently, Flora. How

were your studies today?"

Thus addressed with a smile, Flora answered something but seemed unable to calm herself down. After that, the silence dragged on.

No doubt finding it dreary, Melissa changed the topic.

"I heard from Ineli that you are still preciously keeping hold of an old book."

"From Elder Sister?"

The slightest of smiles peeped out from Flora's face. She was probably happy that her sister had remembered something so trivial.

"I am certain that was something that Ineli once received from His Majesty, was it not? Take good care of it."

When Melissa said that, Flora for some reason lifted her face as though startled.

"…Yes," she answered in a faint and fading voice, and after that, she obstinately shut herself away in her shell.

At around the same time, Ineli Mephius was, in fact, within the palace premises. She was in a courtyard which was screened by a promenade along which grew luxuriant trees. There was a small armoury on the south side. Although the sun had already set, it was naturally not an appropriate place for an imperial princess to be.

The drab street clothes that she wore were unusually subdued for her. A young soldier waited by her side.

Although, for all that he was a soldier, his only weapon was a short sword at his waist, and even that was hidden beneath his overcoat. That was probably because he was not one of the palace guards who were allowed to enter that courtyard. No doubt because he was aware that he was breaking the regulations, his young face was pale.

"It's too dangerous, Princess," he repeated while incessantly looking around left and right. "And if anything were to happen, I am not sure that I would be able to protect you by myself. You have to understand that he is not normal. No matter what we ask

him, he just mutters something unintelligible and…"

"That isn't something to be frightened of."

Ineli laughed airily in front of the arsenal and lightly touched the young soldier's cape. From that alone, the youth's face flushed crimson. He was one of the capital's garrison guards. Some time ago, his garrison had undertaken a search for a certain man on Ineli's orders.

When she had received the news that the person had been found, Ineli had announced that "I want to meet him at once."

As it would, of course, have been far too conspicuous for the Imperial Princess to go to the garrison station, she had issued orders to a company commander who could allow entry into the palace, and the man had been moved to the armoury earlier that day.

It was precisely there that she was going to see that man now. For some reason, Ineli had assigned only one young soldier to act as her guard while she was doing so. Although, for all that he was a soldier, he appeared to be not yet twenty and his facial features still retained a trace of innocence. Ineli stretched out her fingers to the lightly curling hair that reached to above his shoulders.

"From this close, your face is exactly like that of an Endean nobleman."

"P-Princess…"

"I believe in you, my Prince. You'll protect the weak Ineli, won't you?"

"T-That – of course!"



While the young man who was about three years older than her was in ecstasy, Ineli produced the key to the armoury and opened the door. At her orders, her sentinel was to stay on the alert outside the door.

When the princess raised her lamp, a shadow inside scuttled hurriedly as though to escape from its light. It was movement like that of a wild beast, but, upon closer inspection, the shadow was human.

Its face and entire body was wrapped in bandages. It was impossible to tell at a glance what kind of person it was.

Both its ankles were chained, like those of a slave, and the eyes that were looking up towards the intruder were filled with fear.

“Do not be afraid,” Ineli whispered sweetly. “I have been looking for you for a long time. Now, now, nothing scary will happen to you here. Please tell me your name.”

She crouched down to bring her gaze level with that of the man who was practically on his hands and knees on the ground, looking ready to escape at any moment.

With a tense expression, the young guard asked about the situation from outside, only to receive the peremptory command to not let anyone get close. He immediately turned his attention back to the outside of the armoury.

Meanwhile –

“A-a-a,’ the man struggled for breath. “I-I’m… Bane. C-Captain Bane, of the Black Armoured Division.”

The Black Armoured Division.

The name of a military unit that no longer existed. Because its commander, Oubary Bilan, had at one time been falsely accused of assassinating the crown prince, the Black Armoured Division had been dissolved; and the three hundred or so soldiers who did not appear to have been involved in his plot were integrated into various other units.

And then – Captain Bane. Originally an unimpressive figure wholly unconnected to splendid military feats, it was uncertain that there was anyone in Solon who even remembered him, yet his name was linked by fate with that of Crown Prince Gil. Right,

his fate was deeply intertwined with that of the man whom Ineli was relentlessly fixated on, the very "traitor" who, even now, was dividing Mephius in two.

Ineli Mephius remained crouching.

"I see… Bane. Why is a hero from the glorious Black Armoured Division in a place like this? Why do you fear humans like a beast which has escaped from its cage and crawl on all fours through the town, hunting for scraps of food? Please tell me everything. Because from today onwards, you will regain your human dignity and position."

As the Imperial Princess of Mephius talked, Bane gazed upon her as though upon a saint. Even as his breathing continued to be ragged and harsh, and although, just as Ineli had said, he definitely shrank back like livestock terrified of humans, he brokenly started telling his tale.

It was right after the two battles that Taúlia had waged against Apta. The reconciliation with Ax Bazgan had brought a period of peace to Apta but, before long, Captain Bane had suddenly received summons from Gil Mephius.

The two of them had galloped through the dead of night. He had been informed neither of their destination nor of their purpose. Then, at the point they had arrived at, they were captured by the bandits who had been raising trouble in the neighbourhood. The village at which the two of them had dismounted was precisely the bandits' hideout.

The two of them had been locked away separately, but Gil pretended to have slipped away through a gap in the guard's vigilance, and freed Bane. Whereupon, he gave as reason for Bane escaping along that, "I'd attract too much attention. If they realise that I've gone, they'll chase after us like their lives depend on it." He then ordered him to go and bring back help.

Feeling frantic, Bane flew back to Apta Fortress and reported all that had happened to his superior officer, General Oubary Bilan of the Black Armoured Division.

Gil must have calculated that Oubary would want to have a monopoly on this outstanding achievement, and so would only bring a small number of troops with the pretext of "not attracting attention".

The Black Armoured Division were ambushed in that village. As soon as they entered the inner part of it, flaming arrows came flying overhead and within an instant, their surroundings were lit up as brightly as the noontime sun.

For a moment, a shadow seemed to have been branded into the earth's surface.

Then, that shadow had suddenly dissolved. The next instant, it had turned into the figures of bandits swooping down with swords and axes in hand.

Bane remembered parrying once, then twice, with his sword. That, however, was all he could recall from the fight. Judging the situation to be unfavourable, he had been about to run away when he had received a blow from behind from an axe.

He had collapsed in a dead faint but, fortunately, he had been wearing a steel helmet and had only fallen unconscious. When he had come to, the entire area had turned into a sea of flames.

Bane had screamed voicelessly and had used the very limits of his strength to flee. Even as his face, arms, and legs were scorched, even when he could no longer breathe, he had run and run, seized with a despair that was like swimming in a pitch-black ocean.

And then, from amidst the bushes into which Bane had collapsed, he saw –

The crown prince and General Oubary were facing off against each other, their raised swords interposed between them. As sparks flew and the swords collided with one another, Bane finally realised…

This had all been part of a carefully devised plan. That Gil Mephius – or rather, that someone who looked like the crown prince – had set a trap to bury the Black Armoured Division.

As he watched, the General was driven back and soon fell before the sword that the prince swung like lightning.

Although his consciousness was hazy and dim, that one scene was one that Bane had not torn his eyes away from. The prince's clothes had caught fire and burned. The heaving muscles on his back had been gleaming with sweat. And in its centre was, beyond a doubt, the mark from a slave brand.

Afterwards, the bandits had started to throw the bodies of the Black Armoured Division's soldiers into the fire. They would toss two or three corpses into the flames, then every time, they would shout something and laugh out loud. To Bane, they looked like a group of demons. Bane had once again lost consciousness.

When he woken up, there was no one around and only the pillars of black smoke rising up from the ground's surface were left to prove that the small village had been there.

Even though his entire body was covered in severe burns, Bane had unsteadily started walking, as though fleeing from looming danger. He had stolen repeatedly from one village after another, fleeing further and further west, as if being pursued by some invisible spectre, until finally, he had collapsed and been found by a man called Rone Jayce.

A brand.

Ineli gulped. At some point, she had gotten to her feet and was looking down at Bane from above.

The brand… of a slave.

That was certainly what he had said.

While travelling through his fear-coated memories, the wretched man who had now finished speaking must have been vividly reliving the emotions he had felt at the time, and his entire body was quivering unceasingly as he dribbled tears and drool.

It all seemed like the senseless ramblings of a man who had lost his sanity.

And yet, at the same time, a strange feeling was stirring within Ineli.

I want it to be true.

Ineli was convinced that the man who currently claimed to be the crown prince was an impostor. Up until now, however, she had not been able to grasp his real identity. Because of the close resemblance in their faces, she had even considered that he might be someone linked by blood to the imperial family whose existence and identity had been hidden for some reason or another.

Yet she was being told that he was a slave. In Mephius, they were the very lowest category, treated on par with livestock.

That, however, was convenient for Ineli. That his origins were the lowliest of the low

meant that the crown prince's secret was all the bigger. The impact when it was exposed would be huge.

That man… Is that right? A slave… he's a slave?

Ineli trembled.

A brat.

What flashed through Ineli's mind were the words that the man disguised as Prince Gil had spoken softly as they had passed by one another.

A brat like you doesn't understand anything. Any more whining from you and I'll strangle you with my own hands. Got it, little girl?

Those had been the words of a slave? Those had been the words that a slave, whose life was one of sipping mud on the very lowest rung, who could be killed at a single order from his master, had spoken to Emperor Guhl Mephius' step-daughter?

As though it had been set alight, Ineli's entire body burned with the heat of anger such as she had never felt before. Yet at the same time, there was a strange pleasure in the incandescence that coursed within her.

Dizzy and shivering from fury, the princess staggered for a second and, placing her hand against the wall, she waited for her violent emotions to subside.

Suddenly shifting her gaze, she saw the wretched man who was still trembling while clutching his head.

He no longer had any use.

Not only was Ineli done with him, but he was also certain to become an obstacle to the future of Mephius.

The Imperial Princess once again crouched down. She gently stretched out her hands towards that quivering back and shoulders, and hugged them close.

Bane's entire frame heaved with a sudden start.

"It's alright. Don't be afraid… It's alright," Ineli whispered into his ear. She deliberately

pressed the man by the shoulders towards the swell of her breasts.

A light that was hard to describe came into the eyes of the perpetually trembling Bane. He was right against the young girl's soft, fair skin. As she murmured words that were almost like love, an unknown fragrance wafted towards him with her warm breath. This time, it was Bane whose entire body succumbed to heat as he was seized by passion.

With a cry like a beast's, Bane's body covered hers.

The girl screamed.

Ah! – The guard standing sentry outside hurriedly peeked through the crack of the door. A black shadow was wriggling. Beneath it, slender limbs that glowed with an almost dazzlingly white lustre were struggling.

Instantly drawing his conclusion, the sentry pulled his sword in every bit as much of a frenzy as Bane, and rushed in.

He was a soldier from the downtown area garrison, where his duties amounted to chasing fleeing burglars or slaves, or forcibly restraining drunkards who were swinging swords around. Before he even fully realised it, the other man had collapsed, blood pouring from his head.

While he was still breathing violently, he heard Ineli's voice murmuring a few words.

"He is still breathing."

The young soldier looked towards her, then shifted his gaze in a fluster. Her clothes were torn and her naked body – or, at any rate, one of her ample breasts, was completely exposed.

It was only afterwards that he realised what the princess was saying. Although Bane was lying prostrate with blood gushing from his head, his back was spasming weakly.

The sentry was once again seized with violent anger. When he thought of how that filthy man had ripped the princess' clothes and buried his face against her bare skin, he felt that he could not be allowed to live.

"Do it."

Ineli's voice flew over his barrier of reason and moved him to action. He raised his sword with a strangely shallow stroke, then swung it down.

Without raising another sound, Bane stopped moving completely.

"You did well."

Ineli stepped to the sentry's side. She took his blood-covered hand.

"P-Princess…"

"I should let the hero who saved the future of Mephius take his reward."

Ineli guided his hand towards a warm, soft sensation.

While the youth's mind was being pulled into a white mire, Ineli giggled softly to herself. *It only needs to be just me alone*.

I'm the only one who needs to know the prince's real identity. The one who holds vital knowledge about the man who will eventually be ruling the country.

The actions she had just taken greatly resembled those of her mother, Melissa Mephius, but naturally, neither the mother nor the daughter had any way of knowing about what each was doing. And their goals were greatly at odds with one another.

On Ineli's instructions, the young sentry transported Bane to the incinerator used for disposing of the corpses of slaves.

From the next day onwards, Ineli's behaviour was striking.

By using her personal connections with the nobles that she already had ties to, as well as with the people she had quickly built up intimacy with in the process of collecting information about the crown prince, Ineli created opportunities for meeting a great many of the retainers.

Within Mephius, Ineli was shown great respect for her title of "imperial princess". However – that was limited to only "within Mephius". As she had not inherited the blood of the imperial family, in a way, her worth did not extend beyond being useful as a reward for a retainer or as a tool for negotiations with foreign countries.

It was partly for that very reason that she was so eager. The current chaos was Ineli's best chance of seizing an opportunity to become a central figure in Mephius.

Part 2

Crowds of people were jostling and shovelling along the side of the highway in the hopes of catching a glimpse of Gil Mephius.

When five hundred soldiers from the imperial capital's Defence Force had expressly gone to the outskirts of Nedain to meet him, he had declined to board an air carrier or a horse-drawn carriage.

"This isn't a trip that needs any hurry. My apologies to Father, but I'll be taking it easy to travel."

The Defence Force had reluctantly resigned itself to surrounding Prince Gil on all sides in order to defend him, but –

"Don't go before me. You impudent curs can huddle together behind me," the prince had roared. Because of that, the soldiers from the Defence Force, who had originally intended to meet Prince Gil then immediately return to Solon, found themselves in the awkward position of having to follow behind him, exactly as though they were the Imperial Guards that he commanded.

Incidentally, those who had accompanied the prince from Nedain did not total five hundred.

At the front was Crown Prince Gil Mephius, riding a white horse. Not far from him, on a sweating, black-coated horse that stood in contrast to his, was the masked swordsman Orba. Behind him followed Pashir, the runner-up in the gladiatorial tournament, and thirty other Imperial Guards who had likewise been gladiators marched after him.

Prince Gil was on the move –

In the blink of an eye, the news travelled around the entire Imperial Dynasty, and nobles and commanders from all corners hurriedly made the journey to Solon. Which meant that not only Gil but also all the most important lords whose names were linked to the Imperial Dynasty were, at that moment, converging on the capital from every direction either by horse, along the highways, or by ship through the sky.

"This isn't a 'trip' we need to hurry," Gil repeated.

From a discerning standpoint, this 'trip' might need to be called a 'last journey'. What he was headed towards might well be a cold prison in which were probably awaiting iron chains to steal the freedom from his limbs, and repulsive instruments of torture to wring every last drop of blood from his body.

Yet even so, as he jolted along on his horse, Gil remained perfectly relaxed. When he spotted fruit on the trees growing along highway, he got an attendant to pick them and then munched on them on horseback; he returned the greetings of each of the children who cheered for him as a hero and gave him military-style salutes; and when he stopped overnight at a village, he attended the small banquets that the village bigwigs held for him.

Gil had revolted against Emperor Guhl and had led his men into defeating and killing other Mephians. By rights, he could have expected to be the target of hatred.

True, Emperor Guhl had an autocratic style of government which had started to veer towards tyranny, but the influence of that was not yet widely felt among the populace. Therefore, there was no great surge among the people to defeat a vicious and foolish ruler.

However, Gil was known to have played a heroic role in Solon and in Apta. And it was a fact that there were not a few people who regarded him as the hero, and as their sovereign, of the next era.

Which was why the people did not probe any further into the quarrel between Guhl and Gil. Because the crowds of people who were standing on tiptoe to catch sight of Gil, the children who were badgering their parents to take them up on their shoulders; the women who were cheering gaily, all believed that –

Our Crown Prince made a bold decision.

He avoided war for our sake.

Such was the wave of emotions that reached Gil – that reached Orba as he gazed at the people from atop his horse. Incidentally, the other Orba, who was riding close by, was the one who might as well be called 'Orba's body-double', the Imperial Guard Kain in disguise. He had happily taken up that role again after a long time. When voices called out from all around to the hero who served the crown prince, he proudly raised his hand.

Watching the way they were welcomed, Orba's thought was that – I was right.

In the east was Emperor Guhl, who would let thunder roar among the dark clouds covering the sky as he consolidated his reign over the country. Coming from the west and reaching out towards the east, the new hero, Gil Mephius. If the torrents of their two fates collided, countless corpses would probably be left scattered in their wake, while blood and gore might flow until it covered the earth's surface.

Orba had deliberately chosen to avoid that. There was also the issue with Allion and the fear that he might lose his cause, but the main reason for his decision was the thought that – *if I keep my eyes fixed on the 'later', I'll be doing the same thing as Guhl, and nobody would follow me*.

Instead, *after this clash*, when Orba had a crown on top of his head, he was ready to go out and meet the future, accompanied by the military forces and the people of the Imperial Dynasty of Mephius.

Even **he** had noticed that the town had suddenly become full of life.

The interior of the room was dark.

All **he** had to do to have an unbroken view over Solon was to open those heavy curtains, but even though **he** started to get up from the chair, in the end, **he** stopped still.

After all, to start with, one of **his** legs still would not walk, and of **his** two hands, there were only three or four fingers that **he** could move without difficulty.

Bald-headed and large-bodied, **his** name was Oubary Bilan.

Formerly, he had been the commander of the Black Armoured Division. A man whose name had been linked with Mephius' twelve generals, and who had also occupied that position.

But now, not only had he lost that title, but he had also been wounded so badly that it was doubtful whether he would ever be able to hold a sword again. Had it been an injury received while fighting an enemy who was out to harm Mephius, then Oubary could have held his head up high and claimed it as a badge of honour, but the one who

had injured him had been none other than…

……

Oubary hurriedly shook his head over what he had been about to think.

Not a single ray of light shone through the curtains.

His surroundings were quiet. There were only a few chamberlains to look after him and the number of his visitors amounted to none.

The place where he was living was not his original residence. The mansion in which he had resided when he was one of the twelve generals had burned down during the time when Oubary had been imprisoned on the charge of having assassinated the crown prince.

The origin of the fire was unclear.

It was as though somebody had cursed him with relentless misfortune, yet Oubary continued to live his quiet, his monotonously quiet, existence. Day after day, he spent his time in silence within his room. He had been forbidden from leaving the building anyway, and armed soldiers were constantly keeping watch on it. Even so, it was not to the point of his being forbidden from coming and going from his room; yet he would either be reading a book, eating the meals that the chamberlains brought in without exchanging any personal words with them, or sleeping once the sun had set. His entire life was lived in that one room.

Apart from the fact that the outside was a little noisier, that day too was a day without change for Oubary.

“Lord Oubary, may we enter?”

Sometime after noon, the chamberlains came in and started changing the bed sheets.

Oubary sat watching them without any interest. He looked like a lonely old man at the end of his life, and it was hard to believe that not so long ago, Emperor Guhl had praised him as “a warrior whose daring is equal to that of any commander from the neighbouring countries.”

“Have you heard?” One of the chamberlains pipped up innocently as he was working.

The one he was addressing showed absolutely no response. However, the chamberlain simply wanted to avoid falling into shared silence with this strange occupant who almost seemed to have assimilated into the darkness that shrouded the room.

“They say that His Highness the crown prince is finally coming to Solon. I really wonder what kind of words His Majesty will exchange with…”

Casually turning around, he realised that Oubary’s thin lips were curved into a faint smile.

Huh? Thought the chamberlain.

Those heavy shoulders were shaking. No, not just his shoulders – his arms and legs, his cheeks, all were quivering.

“General!” The chamberlain unthinkingly cried out his former title.

A stain spread out from beneath Oubary Bilan’s lower half, and started dripping drop by drop from the chair.

Even so, the former general of the Black Armoured Division was still smiling. He continued to smile while his entire body trembled and urinated incontinently.

Gil Mephius had entered Solon.

When he received that report, Guhl Mephius gave one short order.

“Keep him waiting.”

He had him stay in a residence near the centre of Solon which had been prepared beforehand. Gil Mephius was then kept waiting for three days.

Was he deliberately making things difficult to have Gil fully endure the taste of fear and irritation, or did he intend to wait until every single retainer had arrived at the capital – the question was debated both among the nobles and the people.

The emperor and the crown prince.

The father and son who had unleashed bloody battles around Birac and Nedain. Who knew what would happen when they met face-to-face. Wanting to witness the scene of what was certain to be a historic moment, there were those who travelled from afar to reach the capital, as well as many who were leaving Solon for a while, fearing that the situation might turn alarming.

Because the emperor had purposely delayed that moment by three days, an oppressive feeling of tension drifted through Solon.

As for what Gil was doing during that time – absolutely nothing worthy of any particular attention. It had been a long time since the crown prince had been in Solon. How much time had passed since he had left here, tasked with the duty to defend Apta Fortress? He had once passed through Solon without stopping when he had been heading to bring reinforcements to Garbera, then had done the same when he had returned to Apta – a behaviour which had made the emperor look at him askance. Various thoughts must no doubt be flitting through his mind.

Among the nobles and the townspeople of Solon, there were also many who believed that maybe – *His Majesty has no intention of meeting the crown prince, and only invited him because he plans to attack him by surprise*. It would not have been surprising if Gil himself had shared those misgivings, yet, from start to finish, he seemed to just be calmly watching things unfold.

Then, on the morning of the third day, Guhl Mephius received a visitor in his private study. An old man with dark brown skin who was enveloped only in a plain piece of cloth. Needless to say, he was one of the elders of the Dragon Gods' faith.

"That Esteemed One has extended an invitation to His Majesty. Please visit the shrine this afternoon."

"Oh?" With an uninterested expression, Guhl flipped through the pages of a book that he had taken from a shelf. "Have his legs gotten so weak that he can't leave the shrine anymore?"

"… That Esteemed One has been labouring incessantly to correct the diagram of fate. The likes of us cannot begin to imagine the agony of it."

"Is that right?"

"The matter concerning Gil Mephius will be settled this morning. After that, he wishes

to speak with Your Majesty first-hand."

"I get it, I get it," Guhl Mephius answered, his deeply wrinkled face all the while turned away.

After that, he got ready for the audience. He put on a cloak and picked up his crystal-tipped staff in one hand. Then, just as he seemed about to reach for something at his chest, the emperor suddenly summoned the officer of the Imperial Guards who was responsible for guarding him within the palace.

"You called for me, Your Majesty?"

"Take out your gun."

"Yes?"

Although puzzled, he obeyed the order. The handguns that officers of the Imperial Guards carried with them were personally given to them by the emperor when they took up their duties. Guhl looked at the long-serving gun.

"How long ago was it that I gave you this?"

"Ah… Would it be nearly twenty years?"

"It's a really old model, huh. If you'd wanted, you could have had it replaced with a new one."

"It is something that Your Majesty personally bestowed unto me."

The officer appeared to be in the latter half of his forties.

Guhl did not say anything further and instead started doing something curious. He slid open the gun's cylinder and took out a single bullet.

The officer did not say anything.

As a young man, he had loved jokes. He and Guhl had even used to laugh about stupid things. He seemed on the verge of making some unfunny joke along the lines of: *Your Majesty, you truly are the descendant of the Dragon Gods. Are you going to breakfast on a bullet?* Silence reigned however, and amidst it, Guhl took a similarly old-model gun

from his breast, and loaded the single bullet into it.

"That'll be all," Guhl returned the gun and sent the officer of the Imperial Guards away.

After which, escorted front and rear by several of his guards, he made his way to the audience hall.

The pounding of their feet echoed back from the high, domed ceiling. Pale, flickering light glimmered across it. There were artificial pools on either side of the passageway, and the sunlight streaming in from the high windows reflected from their surface.

Statues of the dragons and heroes from Mephius' founding myths were enshrined one by one along the pools. It was the sight that the emperor saw whenever he walked along the passageway leading to the audience hall. In other words, it was a sight that Guhl had grown familiar with over more than thirty years.

Finally, the path came to an end, and a door ornamented in red and gold stood before him. He entered as the official in charge of proclamations announced his arrival.

Far more people than usual were already gathered within the hall. Leading figures and generals in command of all the main fortresses were present. Everyone bowed their heads at the same time.

On every face could be seen the acceptance that, on this day, the future of Mephius would be determined. Even so, there was not the slightest noise or commotion. Only silence ruled.

It looks like…

People exchanged surreptitious glances.

It looks like His Majesty truly does intend to call His Highness before him.

There's still some uncertainty about whether he will throw him in prison without a 'by your leave'…

It's finally starting.

Guhl Mephius sat on the throne. For a while, the old man, who had ruled over Mephius for many long years, lowered his gaze, as though tracing the faint pattern in the marble

of the dais, on which stood the throne, with his eyes. He finally raised his eyes. And, as though afraid that those eyes might emit an invisible beam that could pierce through them and read their hearts, all of the courtiers conversely lowered their gazes.

Next to the emperor was Empress Melissa. In that tense hall where one would hesitate to so much as give a single cough, she alone seemed faintly bored. Her expression was exactly the same as when she was watching a farcical side-show that had dragged on for far too long.

Next to Melissa were the two sisters, Ineli and Flora. The older sister, Ineli had personally entreated the emperor to allow the two daughters to sit with their mother, Empress Melissa. Ineli's back was ramrod straight and her eyes were especially alert, and she looked as though she did not intend to miss a single part of what would happen next. Her younger sister, on the other hand, had her head hunched back into her shoulders, giving the impression that this was painful to her.

And then –

A bronze trumpet was blown.

"His Imperial Highness, Crown Prince Gil Mephius – entering!"

Just as when the emperor had entered, the crier called out in a clear voice.

The two guards that stood on either side of it solemnly opened the massive doors that stood directly opposite the throne.

The people there narrowed their eyes, as if they had been hit with the fierce light of daybreak shining over a mountain ridge, as they peered at the young man who walked in from beyond the door.

A short cape over a white silk tunic. A ceremonial longsword at his hip.

When their eyes took in the young man's appearance, the hushed silence, the almost sacred silence, that had reigned over them suddenly collapsed.

Uwoh.

A sound almost like a moan escaped from someone's throat.

Look.

That's… there's no doubt…

There's no possible doubt, that's the crown prince himself.

His Highness Gil Mephius is alive!

The people there seemed to billow like waves crashing against the cliffs of Zonga.

While the long wave of people ebbed and swayed on either side of him, Gil Mephius walked forward. As far as he seemed to be concerned, that commotion and those emotions were the same as pebbles by the side of the road, and he paid them no attention as he simply walked towards the throne. When he reached the stairs before it, he suddenly knelt.

He waited for the hem of his lightly fluttering cape to settle against his back.

"It has been a long time," Gil Mephius was the first to speak, "Your Majesty Emperor Guhl Mephius – my father. Having received Your Majesty's invitation, Crown Prince Gil Mephius is here to see you."

Part 3

In that moment when Gil knelt and spoke out, a different emotion swept through the hall. It contained a great variety of feelings all jumbled together, but, to summarise it in a few words, there was a sense of being 'deeply moved'.

Tense as they were from this moment having finally arrived, there, before their eyes, was a young warrior, revived from the very abyss of death to stand against the emperor – the feelings that they were witnessing a scene from a heroic legend welled up within them.

There were many, also, who were reminded of the person that, not even a month ago, had knelt in the same place. A very young girl, who could still almost be called a child. Even though she trembled almost imperceptibly, in front of Emperor Guhl, whom all the retainers feared, the girl had stood her ground from beginning to end.

When the figures of the girl in their memories and the young man before their eyes closely overlapped, many of the officers and nobles there were unable to hold down the emotions that welled up within them.

Perhaps it was a sign of the future.

Then –

"It's good that you've come,' said Guhl, unperturbed by the intense emotions that had engulfed the hall.

Having reached this point, Guhl Mephius was not going to take any more of his time to negotiate or to play cat and mouse with his opponent.

"When I sent you to Apta, I did not think that you would be away from the capital for so long. That was not my intention. Too many things have happened. Some were unavoidable, but there are some that I do not understand. The same is no doubt true for the many retainers gathered here."

"Yes," the man who had once been a gladiator and who had been made to kill for the amusement of the masses, assumed the expression of a crown prince and answered.

"It was because I had chosen you to defend Apta that I had you leave Solon. It was clear

that Taúlia's lord, Ax, was awaiting his chance to take aim at our territory. And, in actual fact, I heard you fought him twice in Apta. The final outcome was that although you did not lose Apta, you arrogantly, and without permission, decided to form an alliance with the western Taúlia. Not only that, but immediately afterwards, and also without permission, you sent reinforcements to Garbera. Even though I had Ineli go as a messenger to warn you that you were not to do so. First, let me hear your explanation with regards to these two matters."

The emperor had fired the first shot.

His head very slightly lowered, Orba answered in a firm voice.

"To start with, Apta is not a fortress that can be defended with only a small military force. When the first battle occurred, we did not have time to request aid from Solon and, I am ashamed to admit, we had fallen into a predicament from which we were rescued by the Garberan troops which had been about to pull out of there. However, it was not difficult to guess that Ax was likely to attack again without wasting any time, so I pulled our troops far back and deliberately lured him to Apta. Because of the fierce fighting, the fortress suffered partial destruction, however, we were able to deal Ax a serious blow. To avoid further mutual damage, we agreed to pull back our soldiers. And on that occasion, I came to an unusual understanding with Ax Bazgan."

Orba took his time and answered at a relaxed pace. He continued –

"Around that time, I too heard the information that war was probably about to break out between Garbera and Ende. Garbera is, needless to say, the birthplace of my future wife, Vileena Owell, and thus a country with which we have formed an alliance. I also owed them a favour for helping me in Apta. Your Majesty, you were convinced that the conflict would not escalate, and you held the conviction that we should not recklessly take part and needlessly risk fanning the flames of war, so you sent Ineli with a message to 'not send reinforcements', however…"

At that point, Orba glanced up towards the princess for a moment. In actual fact, Ineli had deliberately delayed conveying the message to the crown prince. Of course, not only would emphasising that fact now simply sound like an excuse, also, and more importantly, even if he had received the message, Orba would not even have considered cancelling the reinforcements to Garbera.

In the instant that their eyes met, Ineli visibly stiffened, but Orba immediately

returned his gaze to the emperor's face.

"I too had already participated in some battles. I was convinced that if Ende saw that Mephius intended to honour the alliance, they would definitely pull back before the opening of hostilities. Although I cannot claim to have Your Majesty's discerning eye, and although I now blush at my youthful recklessness, at the time, I believed it to be the best policy in order to protect the 'cause' that was our alliance with Garbera. I am of course young and inexperienced, but I had intended to fully accept the consequences. I am merely one of Your Majesty's retainers; there was no way for me to excuse my crime of having disobeyed the orders that I had received from you, so I had intended to simply remain in Apta until you had formally handed down your verdict."

As Orba spoke, none of the retainers uttered a sound. He sensed that their silence was not only due to fear of Emperor Guhl, but that it also stemmed from the intent of evaluating the next ruler.

While Orba was talking, Guhl did not brusquely interrupt him, nor condemn without listening to what he had to say.

What Guhl wanted above all else was a direct confrontation. In place of swords, guns, shields and battle formations, it was words that flew between the two, and that were arrayed around them. The emperor and Crown Prince were meeting on the premise that they would need to fight fairly.

Therefore, this too was war.

A single slip of the tongue would be the same as offering the enemy a chance to attack. Being at a loss for a single word was equivalent to losing an officer able to command a thousand men. And whoever ran out of words would be the one whose fate would have run its course.

This was the final fight that Orba had to overcome in order to raise himself up to the position of emperor of an entire country – he who had originally been a person whose birth and death would not be recorded in history, and whose life would only have been remembered by those who lived in his area, only to soon fade even from their memories. And it was a fight without swords or strategy, one in which he needed to prove to his only opponent, his "father", that he was the real person, despite being an impostor.

Observing that the crown prince had finished talking for the time being, the emperor raised his eyebrows.

“Indeed, I immediately sent a messenger to Apta to invite you to come before the throne in Solon so that I could hear what you had to say. That much certainly happened. Yet shortly after having returned to Apta, my son was shot and lost from this world – that is what I heard. And in fact, I sent search parties to Apta, yet none were able to find Crown Prince Gil Mephius.”

“…”

“The grief I experienced then was shared by all of Mephius’ people. Yet now, you are here kneeling before me.”

From beneath his heavy eyelids, Guhl Mephius glared at the one who used the same name and had the same appearance as his son.

“Why did you deliberately feign your own death and deceive not only the retainers and the people, but even I, your own father?”

“Yes,” Orba once more lowered his head.

Princess Vileena had once asked him the same sort of question.

You who were supposed to have died in Apta, what have you been doing until now and what led you to return? Well? Please do tell.

That time, the muzzle of a gun had been gleaming right before Orba’s eyes.

And this time too, an invisible gun, blade, and guillotine were flickering from behind the emperor. Even as he grew tenser, Orba started to narrate “circumstances” which closely resembled those he had previously explained to the princess.

While he had been inspecting the territory, he had learned that the commander of the Black Armoured Division, Oubary Bilan, had in the past attacked villages in Apta’s vicinity.

While he was pursuing investigations, Oubary once more moved his troops to attack one of the villages by the border. Gil had caught wind of it just before it happened but, as he did not have time to gather his soldiers to hold Oubary back, he had no choice

but to lay a trap in the village and to repel him by force.

“We just barely managed to defeat Oubary. However, when I was interrogating the captured soldiers from the Black Armoured Division, they claimed that he had planned to assassinate me and to make it look as though the west had done it. Well, from the start, his aim when attacking the village was to pretend that Taúlia was responsible and to once more re-ignite a war against them. Not only that, but they hinted that Oubary was not the only one involved in the plot.”

While he was imperturbably laying out these new “facts”, the retainers’ expressions revealed in turn surprise and confusion.

“Oh? So who was the one conspiring with Oubary?” Guhl asked, snorting through his moustache. “Among all the people here, is that person present?” Orba briefly swept his gaze around his surroundings. For a moment, the hall was enveloped in a different kind of nervousness than earlier.

“Well, it seems that the rank and file soldiers were not given the name. Which is why I had no choice but to be very cautious. There was someone in Mephius who, unknown not only to myself but also to Your Majesty, was scheming war with other countries. And who was even willing to secretly kill me, a member of the imperial family, to accomplish that. I believed that it might develop into a plot equal to the rebellion that Zaat Quark had been scheming.”

“…”

“I should probably have immediately rushed to Solon with that information. However, and although you may laugh at my shallow and inexperienced way of thinking, I had only just defied one of Your Majesty’s orders. I was worried that if I were to then nonchalantly return to Solon, Your Majesty would find my words difficult to believe. Would I not instead be giving that heinous person, who was connected to Oubary, a chance to conceal the truth? On the other hand, if Your Majesty ordered me to return to Solon, and I once again disobeyed you, I was sure to forfeit even more of your trust.”

Everyone there was could understand the implicit meaning behind Gil’s words.

Orba did not need to look around the hall for them to be able to guess the identity of the “someone” who had plotted to invade the west.

Emperor Guhl Mephius.

Obviously, Orba himself was perfectly aware that what he was saying was not the actual truth. However, it was not hard to imagine that the emperor had long had designs on the west, and he had in fact been going to put them into effect after Gil Mephius had faked his own death in Apta.

And at the end of the day, it was a fact that the emperor had dispatched armed forces against Taúlia. No matter how much of his authority he used, that was one truth that Guhl could not erase.

“If I, the only one who knew truth, was placed under restraint in punishment for my crimes, that person might once more target my life, and I was afraid that might cause the country to take a wrong turn, and plunge it into a war with the west that neither the people nor the retainers wanted. Moreover, I myself had only just entered into an alliance with Sir Ax; just as with Garbera, I could not fail to uphold it. Therefore, I decided that, for the time being, I would pretend to have been shot by Oubary’s men, leave Mephius, and rapidly inform the west of what was going on.”

“So, in other words, while we were crushed with grief at receiving the news of the crown prince’s death, you were doing nothing less than making preparations in Taúlia to ambush our fine soldiers?”

“It was a bitter decision to have to make. The alliance with the west had certainly been made on my judgement alone, but, when I left Solon, Your Majesty had done me the honour of saying that you left the matter of Taúlia entirely to me. Both sides had suffered considerable losses during the fighting, but we had fought fairly and I had afterwards sworn friendship with its ruler, Ax Bazgan. I could not allow some ambitious person to trample that underfoot with their schemes.”

“…”

Unlike the kneeling Crown Prince, from whose back energy seemed to be rising like smoke, Emperor Guhl for some reason seemed to find this swift exchange of words troublesome. From an outside perspective, it looked as though he needed to muster all of his strength to open his mouth.

“In that case, it would have been best if, immediately after defending Taúlia, you had personally come to Solon and talked to me directly. Why did you feel the need to deliberately announce yourself in Apta and fight the troops which I sent there?”

“Your Majesty, would you have been prepared to listen to what I had to say?”

“If a son who was believed dead was to reappear, any father would listen.”

“No,” Orba flatly declared. As the people around them gasped, he continued, “How could I possibly believe that Your Majesty would be willing to lend me your ears when you had only just failed in your invasion of Taúlia? You might have arbitrarily decided that I was the product of evil western sorcery, or a body-double set up by someone who intended to rebel, and had me secretly executed.”

Guhl growled something. He was just about to break out into shouting but then gave up on the idea, or perhaps he realised that doing so would have been a mistake.

Orba could tell that those hostile to him were losing vitality. He could smell the mood that was drifting through the hall. He sensed instinctively that here and now, he should unsheathe the invisible sword at his waist and thrust with it. Unconsciously, he firmly straightened his waist and moved his knees forward.

“Just now, I said that it was a bitter decision. It was agonising to be the one to divide the country, but in order to ensure peace as quickly as possible, not only in the west but also in Mephius, I had to harden my heart and grasp a sword. And in fact, was it not only after I had announced myself at the risk of my own life, and slipped through blades and storms of bullets to take Birac and Nedain, that Your Majesty finally felt inclined to listen to me like this?”

“So you’re saying that you killed our country’s soldiers simply to prove yourself?”

“Repeating myself.”

Compared to the emperor, whose words somewhat gave the impression of prey being driven into a corner, everything that Gil said were almost tangibly full of vigour.

“… Is all that I can do, Father. I have already stated this several times, but it was unbearable for me to kill Mephian warriors. When I swung my sword, the soldiers whose helmets cracked open beneath it might have been the parents or the brothers of those gathered here. The soldiers whose breasts were pierced by my bullets might have babies who are even now crying pitifully in the towns and villages of these domains, or aged grandparents. No matter how uprightly my life is from now, the wounds caused by this war, both to Mephius and to myself, will not be easily healed. Which is why…”

Gil Mephius raised his head.

"*Which is why*, Your Majesty, please heed my words. So that these wounds that Mephius bears will not be in vain. So that no more young blood need be spilled in this fight. Your Majesty, having taken Nedain, I am far from being at a disadvantage, so why is it that you nevertheless asked me to come before your presence? Why is it that you are having me exchange words with you, Your Majesty, in front of all the commanders and lords gathered here?"

Why? – Guhl no longer spoke.

As though wanting to use that silence as a foothold to leap even further, Orba's tone grew firmer.

"I have heard that Allion is moving to invade Ende. And that a request for reinforcements has come from Ende. Your Majesty, please give me the order. With your permission, I will immediately organise a military force and will show you how I put a stop to Allion's ambitions."

Within the hall, finally unable to contain their agitation, the retainers exchanged glances. They had heard the news of Allion's invasion. The great power in the east. All of them naturally feared that it planned to gain a foothold in Ende, from where it would bring its warhorses to the centre of the continent.

Even while receiving a princess from Garbera as a wife for his son, the emperor had been manoeuvring to draw closer to Ende. He might, therefore, have been expected to immediately respond to the appeal for help, but there was a reason why Mephius was unable to simply send soldiers. And that reason was the matter concerning Gil Mephius.

And now, Gil himself was offering to lead reinforcements to Ende. Moreover, in order to do so, he had chosen to leave an advantageous encampment and had come to Solon, which was the same as handing himself to his opponents.

How did the people there see Gil Mephius now? As a peerless hero or as a fool unmatched in all of History? Whatever the case, having seen him like this first-hand, his name and figure certainly loomed much larger than before in the mind of the commanders and nobles there.

It was indeed because of the fact of Allion's invasion that Orba had come to kneel before Emperor Guhl even at the risk of his own life. At the same time – and just as he had once said to Pashir – this was also something that he saw as a bright ray of hope.

Allion had become a common enemy for both Guhl and Gil. Therefore, he had made use of it. Orba had, in a manner of speaking, prepared a "way out" for the emperor.

If things turned into a life-or-death battle, the emperor would inevitably strike down with all his might. Solon would be turned into a sea of flames. As Pashir had pointed out, he might also once again take measures to dispose of Orba in secret.

And so, he had deliberately avoided the issue of victory and defeat.

He judged that if Gil Mephius did not display an attitude of being desperate for victory, the emperor would weigh the situation and take that "way out", resigning himself for the time being to sending Gil to Ende, which was certain to have a considerable effect on the retainers.

"Your Majesty, your decision, please."

It looked as though the colourless, odourless smoke rising from Gil Mephius' back would soon engulf the pitiable old man before spreading its dominion to every corner of the hall.

"Indeed," Emperor Guhl Mephius blinked his heavy-lidded eyes.

A moment passed.

With that pause in their exchange of words, Guhl's tone of voice suddenly softened.

"It's true that you have a valid point. As a father, I was enraptured as I listened. I believe it was good that I summoned you and that we talked face-to-face like this. When I first heard the messenger, I wondered what kind of fool it was who was pretending to be my son, but, indeed, that look of yours is worthy of the crown prince of Mephius, and you have a proud soul. I can see why Rogue, Odyne, and the others joined your side."

Oh – The court shook once more.

A smile appeared on Guhl's lips, which were partly hidden behind his moustache. The emperor too was finally recognising that the one kneeling before him was undoubtedly his real son, the true Crown Prince of Mephius.

This truth would determine Mephius' future.

Orba lowered his head respectfully.

He sighed secretly, as though to wring every last drop of air from his lungs. For now, this marked a turning point in the fight. First came cooperating with Ende to push back the might of Allion. Not only would this protect Mephius, it would also consolidate Crown Prince Gil's achievements and…

"One more thing."

Guhl's voice was strangely sharp as it cleaved through the harmonious atmosphere that had been starting to pervade the hall.

In that instant, Orba felt like a beast which had been holding its breath until now had abruptly reared its huge form from behind Emperor Guhl.

"There is just one more thing that I want to confirm."

"That… What on earth is it?"

"I want you to remove your clothes, here and now, and show me your back."

Guhl's voice echoed for a long time.

At least, that was how it sounded to Orba.

Chapter 3
In Garbera's Royal Capital

Part 1

When she woke up, she was greeted by the sight of a dearly missed face.

The hour appeared to already be close to evening; the rays of sunlight streaming through the window were faintly red.

Blinking her eyes, Vileena Owell whispered, "Grandfather…" and broke into a smile towards that dearly missed face that was looking towards her.

"Still… I'm still asleep, aren't I?"

Her grandfather, Jeorg Owell, smiled back.

Each season, Vileena had the habit of spending some time with her grandfather at the detached palace. They would go fishing, or she would accompany him when he went hunting, they would play at war, and would generally have fun together outdoors.

Whenever she would fall asleep, exhausted from having played, Jeorg would carry his granddaughter home on his back, and would gently watch over her until she woke up in her bed.

"Are you going to sleep like that? Or is my rambunctious princess starving, and is it about time for dinner?"

Those words too were nostalgic, unchanged from the past. Afterwards, they would eat, surrounded by servants who, fittingly for her grandfather's personal attendants, were energetic yet never made a wasted movement, and who were always smiling kindly. And after that, she would excitedly listen as her grandfather read old heroic tales.

Ah – While bittersweet emotions spread out throughout her chest, Vileena also felt a piercing point of pain. No matter how much she wanted to immerse herself in nostalgic memories, a voice urged her that *it couldn't be*. Her grandfather could not be *here*. No, it was the other way around, the one who originally could not be *here* was

her.

A dream… Am I dreaming?

Assailed by an unspeakable sadness, she felt the back of her eyelids grow hot.

“Grandfather. You’re here, you’re really here, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I’m here.”

“I never do anything except depend on you, Grandfather. I made up my mind so many times to do what I have to do by myself. But at the most important point, I always end up wanting to see you, Grandfather, and have you scold me. That’s why you’re here, isn’t it? To scold this weak me.”

Oh? – Listening to Vileena’s abstracted recollections, Jeorg raised his eyebrows. He cleared his throat.

“It doesn’t matter. Just before you left for Mephius, when we parted at the detached palace, I was prepared to never see you again in this life. So to be able to see you like this again, even though only in a dream, is enough to make me happy.”

“I was an idiot back then.”

Vileena muttered, staring up at the ceiling. It was not one that she recognised. It was different from the one at the detached palace. Even though this was a dream, not everything matched up with the ideals.

“Back then, even though I was leaving Garbera to marry into Mephius, even so, I thought that I would definitely be able to see you again soon, Grandfather. Back then, Mephius was only an enemy country to be hated and defeated. I thought that I would definitely return in triumph after having sounded out that enemy country’s internal situation and grasped hold of the secrets that would give victory to Garbera. But…”

“But?”

“Soon, I will no longer be Garberan. Vileena’s eyelids trembled like those of a soldier stepping forward on a battlefield. “Sooner or later, I will become Mephian. That is what I decided. That is the land I should return to; it’s the people living in that land that I should love.”

At that instant, Jeorg's expression changed. His white eyebrows drew together and he pursed his lips tightly. Vileena's chest tightened. It was the equivalent of her saying that if anything happened between the two countries, she would turn a bow even against her own grandfather. Considering Jeorg Owell's personality, surely he would not disparage his granddaughter as a traitor.

Then –

"Nothing," Jeorg smiled faintly. "Nothing could make me happier than to hear you say that."

"Grandfather."

"Because nothing could better prove that wherever you go, you are my beloved Vileena."

Grandfather – Vileena was about to say again, but, for the second time, her voice would not come out. Overcome with emotion, she was about to sit up. A dull pain stabbed through her head. Her grandfather stretched out an arm to support her as she started to sway. It was thinner than in her memories, but it was undeniably endowed with strength and flesh.

In the moment that she felt the body heat from Jeorg's skin, Vileena suddenly came to.

"G-Grandfather?" Her eyes sparkled like stars as she opened them wide in amazement and asked, "Grandfather, are you really here?"

"Indeed I am," Jeorg winked. "Because even if you abandon your title as a Garberan princess, the fact will never change that you're my granddaughter."

Amazement and joy spun around in turns inside Vileena's mind, where her memories gradually fell into place.

Right, if her grandfather was really nearby, then this was undoubtedly Garberan territory. Yet this was neither the royal palace nor the detached palace where she had spent so much time with him. Upon asking, she was told that this was a room in Zaim Fortress. Zaim, which was a strategic location in the northwest of Garbera, which it guarded against the nearby Ende and Mephius.

"Coming to such a faraway place… Is your health alright?"

“I’ve been in very good shape recently. I’ve even been able to go horse-riding since a half a month ago, so don’t worry.”

As Jeorg gently answered her, Vileena almost smiled back at him without thinking about it, but just before doing so, she turned her face away with a jerk for exactly the reason that she had stated just a moment ago, during that affair where it was a dream. Because of her feelings that she could not rely on him forever. Although Grandfather said that he was in “good shape”, how long would he have to keep pushing his own weakened body just because she herself was weak and unreliable?

However, as soon as her grandfather’s hand brushed against the cheek that she had turned away, the emotions she had been trying to hold back came crashing down like a wave. She was too overwrought to go against them. The back of Vileena’s eyelids once again grew hot, and this time, she let her tears slide along her smooth cheeks. She turned back around and clung to her grandfather.

His warmth and scent reminded her of the days when she was simply protected by her grandfather and parents, of those days that were like being in a warm spot in the sun.

There was no holding herself back afterwards. Burying her face into her grandfather’s chest, words surged from her like billowing waves. There had been things that she had wanted to tell someone, and things that, conversely, she had told herself she had to keep to herself; but now the border between them burst easily, and she talked about everything that came to her mind, speaking so quickly that her voice could hardly keep up.

There were many people in Mephius who were so much warmer than she had thought when her image had been of an “enemy country”. A grandee called Simon was a lot like Grandfather. But he had died. Because he had carried his convictions through to the end. Emperor Guhl on the other hand was not like Grandfather. He trusted no one and did not seem to be trusted by anyone. He killed his retainers easily. He couldn’t be any more unlike Grandfather, could he? The gladiator games were undoubtedly savage, she could never come to like them, but it was definitely people who lived there.

And then –

“Prince Gil is…”

The girl who had been chatting energetically suddenly stopped after saying the prince’s name. Her grandfather laughed softly and offered her a helping hand.

“He’s like a child, and yet, he’s someone that you can’t let your guard down around, was it?”

At some point before – was it after the drama of Zaat Quark’s rebellion in Solon? – Vileena had written a letter to keep her grandfather informed. He had remembered that sentence.

“Yes,” Vileena smiled through her tears. “He is not the fool that the world says he is. But he is always carrying secrets that he can’t tell others, and he’s an obstinate person who hardly ever opens his heart.”

Just as she said that, a sudden thought occurred to her. Even though she had also intended to keep a number of things locked away in her breast, wrapped up like this in the arms of the grandfather, whom she relied on from the bottom of her heart, she was talking so easily. It was a joy to have someone you could tell anything to while tucked against their warm chest.

He…

Did he have anyone like that? Vileena wondered. He certainly had not been blessed when it came to family love. There was no better proof of that than the fact that he and his own father were fighting in open battle. His mother had already passed away, and he was not related by blood to his current mother and sisters.

He seemed to have an unfathomable connection to some of his subordinates like Shique, Gilliam or Hou Ran. Shique however had lost his life in battle, and she did not think that he had any other companions that he could open up to in the same way.

Oh?

There was one other vitally important person. The former gladiator called Orba. Whenever Prince Gil set up a course of action, he would always be entrusted with the key role. In other words, you could say that he was the man that Gil relied on the most.

Yet even so, she could not picture the relationship between the two of them. That was partly because she had hardly ever seen them together in one place or talking to one another; but somehow or another, Vileena felt that some fundamental part of her perception of them that was lacking, or perhaps mistaken.

“Lonely,” Vileena blinked. “His Imperial Highness Gil Mephius is a lonely person.

Thinking about it, Emperor Guhl, who oppresses his terrified retainers, also seems like a lonely person. Grandfather, why is that? Is that how statesmen are? Is that what it means to lead others?" "There is that side to it too," Jeorg nodded. He gazed at his granddaughter who was wrapped in his arms, and whose expression gradually changed back from that of a small child being pampered to that of a 'princess'. "The king stands alone and apart from the rest of the country. There is that side to it that you cannot help becoming conscious of, whether you want to or not. Because you do not need to look at history up until now to know that even your closest family members might target your life."

"Yes," the princess gave a slight nod.

Maybe it was because she had finally calmed down, but an uncontrollable flow of words was no longer pouring from her. Although, speaking truthfully, there was only one more topic left that she wanted to confide to someone else in. That was that – *I killed someone*.

As she talked to her grandfather, she had, little by little remembered the sequence of events that had led to her return to Garberan territory. Right, so as to turn out Salamand, a Garberan knight who had broken into Mephian territory, she had been lent a hundred soldiers and had personally confronted his unit.

Vileena had raised the muzzle of her gun and had aimed for Salamand's chest.

Up until then, she had practiced shooting for self-defence. In the west, she had shot at an assassin who had had attacked the village. That time, she had aimed at the enemy's feet.

But this time…

The memory of that moment was still vivid. The touch of the trigger, the feeling when she decided to attack – or rather, to 'kill' – Salamand.

As for her reaction? She had not wielded a blade first-hand, she had not cut through flesh and bone, but in that moment, Vileena had certainly felt the weight of life against her fingertip, and she had felt how she was going to steal that weight away.

She did not regret it.

She had been responsible for the hundred lives behind her. Further behind those

hundred soldiers was Mephius' imperial capital, Solon, and further still behind it was Prince Gil, who, along with his companions, was waiting to make his move.

Salamand had to be gotten rid of. It was not only for Mephius, he was also leading Garbera astray; and he was a barrier preventing the emperor and Prince Gil from meeting face-to-face.

And so, I got rid of him. And so, I don't have any regrets – Vileena kept repeating to herself. She understood her own thoughts more than well enough to know that this sounded like an excuse.

She only just stopped herself from telling her grandfather about it. She could just about endure it.

She did not want her grandfather to hate her. She hated the thought that, if she talked about it, her heart would find comfort and be at ease. She felt that if she did so, she would lose the resolve she had felt when pulling the trigger.

It was not a story about the crown prince, like earlier, but it was one that she should keep locked away for now. While the wound had not yet healed and she could still feel blood flowing from it, she would wait for it to slowly scab, and would talk about it to someone once she was alright with showing the scar.

"Grandfather."

During the time they had been talking, Vileena had completely regained her usual expression.

"Hmm?"

"What is the current situation in Mephius? What move has His Highness the crown prince made?"

"There haven't been any noticeable movements yet," the previous king of Garbera unhurriedly nodded his head, and gently pushed Vileena's shoulders to make her lie down. "Since it hasn't been two days since you collapsed."

At around the time that Vileena woke up, the crown prince had not yet taken Nedain. It was, however, around the time when Allion had already started to move against Ende, and when messengers appealing for help had arrived in Mephius and Garbera.

“Allion is…?” Vileena’s large eyes opened wide. She had heard the rumour while she was in Birac. Which meant, of course, that Gil Mephius had also heard about it. “His Highness being as he is, I’m sure he will want to go to Ende immediately. What’s happening in Mephius right now?”

“Hmm,” at that moment, the smile that Jeorg had been wearing ever since seeing his granddaughter again vanished from his face.

Noticing it, Vileena asked –

“How does Garbera intend to move?”

Jeorg gave a small sigh.

“It won’t move yet. Or better said, it can’t move. Father and son are fighting in Mephius, but here in Garbera, the situation is not so very different. Blood-related brothers are antagonistic towards one another, and the situation isn’t progressing at all.”

Part 2

Upon receiving Ende's request for help, the discussions within Garbera were heated.

Although the news that a strong country like Allion was stretching its hand towards 'over here' caused a fair amount of nervousness, there were some voices which doubted that it would develop into a large-scale war.

"For now, we need to confirm that Prince Kaseria is leading a first wave of troops."

"Ende and Allion have long had a deep connection. Since Ende's Prince Jeremie had the flag of the Magic Dynasty with him when he appealed to Allion for help, they couldn't simply ignore him; but perhaps they will do no more than send troops for now?"

Besides which there were also arguments based on emotion.

"Prince Eric was the one chosen to the next Grand Duke of Ende."

"Wasn't Eric the one behind that recent violation of Garbera's borders? Even though there still hasn't been any clear apology from Ende, that man is trying to put pressure on the king; he's showing nothing but contempt for the friendship between Garbera and Ende."

The one who had squarely opposed all of them was Zenon Owell, the commander of the Knights of the Order of the Tiger. In other words, the second prince of Garbera and the very person who had crossed swords in person with Prince Eric when he had raided their borders.

"It's crucial to crush Allion from the outset," Zenon had declared. Which he had followed up by requesting to go to Ende at the head of a troop of reinforcements. "Since we met each other on the battlefield, there will be added significance if I go to lend our strength to His Highness, the next Grand Duke."

As far as Zenon Owell was concerned, after the matter with Salamand, he wanted to quickly bring an end to any discussions that could further divide the country. He hoped to turn away the anti-Mephian feelings that were held by part of the Court, and give them a new target.

Therefore, he believed that, as a member of the royal family, he should take the initiative of setting an example.

He brought it up more than once in discussions with the king. During those times, he also offered the idea that the Order of the Badger should be part of the relief party. This was the Order in which Salamand, who had forced his way into Mephian territory in defiance of the king's wishes, had served as vice-commander. It had naturally come under a lot of criticism recently. The commander of the knightly order had come forward to take responsibility by offering to put himself under arrest, with the intention of stepping down from his duties as commander in the near future, but Zenon had forcefully dragged him away from the meeting.

Other than Zenon, there was no one there who expressed any other clear intentions on the matter, so most of the discussions continued at the pace he set. Besides which, he was previously the one who had regarded Salamand's movements as dangerous, who had brought them to the king's attention, and it was to the prince's credit alone that he had fought at Zaim Fortress to obstruct Salamand's ambitions.

Zenon briskly drew up a schedule for everything from the troops' formation to their departure. Within the country, the speed of his decision-making and his energy in taking action were widely praised.

However, his actions unexpectedly earned him bitter resentment from a certain person – none other than the first prince, Razetta Owell.

"To start with, what exactly is this achievement of a battle at Zaim Fortress that my younger brother is making so much of? If Salamand is a criminal guilty of having defied the king's orders, then Zenon should be reprimanded for the same offence. My brother deceived the king and acted on his own judgement in using military force."

In the end, he instilled his father, King Ainn Owell, with the idea that Zenon's offence could not be overlooked.

"It's not that I want to see my brother thrown in jail. If the king censures Zenon, as a retainer, for his arbitrary conduct but does not punish him, would it not mean a loss of authority before the other retainers? If someone other than the king seizes the power to initiate military action, it will invite unrest into the country. Even if it is only for form's sake, should you not hand down some kind of punishment to Zenon?"

By nature, Razetta was not a man of outstanding resourcefulness, but neither did he

have any particularly objectionable flaws. *That's why he is deserving of being king* – said some rather cynical voices, but nonetheless, he was by nature extremely calm, and it was rare for him to take the initiative of appealing to the king about something.

Moreover, because Razetta had spread the matter around, the king could not afford to ignore it, and so summoned Zenon directly before him.

"The Order of the Tiger will stay in Mavant for a while," he commanded.

Mavant was in the west of Garbera and contained a vast lake, which formed the border with Mephius now that Apta had been returned. Since it was where Zenon and his Order of the Tiger were usually stationed, this was essentially a case of sending back the soldiers who were now massed in the royal capital, Phozon.

"Why, Your Majesty?"

"The situation in Mephius uncertain. It is more important than ever to ensure Mavant's defence." It had been the same during the incident with Salamand: King Ainn Owell loathed the idea of unrest within the country. If possible, he wanted to avoid having the confrontation between his sons, Zenon and Razetta, come out into the open.

Just back down from this – the king's gaze pleaded with his son. It was true that having taken military action of his own accord left Zenon vulnerable on that point.

Then what do you intend to do about the reinforcements to Ende?"

"We will bide our time wisely," was all that the king said.

However, as mentioned earlier, there was no one other than Zenon who was going to take the initiative of getting things moving on this matter. For the commander of the Order of the Badger, it was a certainly a precious chance to regain his honour, but it was easy to imagine that if he put himself forward without Zenon to shield his back, the criticism against him would only grow stronger. He could only remain silent.

Zenon's hands were tied. If he again took military action without permission, he would inevitably be vilified as "disloyal and quick to ignore the king's commands". Moreover, since the very thing that Zenon was trying to avoid was a situation in which the country was divided, he was afraid that pushing things any further than this would defeat the purpose.

And so, this once, he had no choice but to dutifully comply with the king's orders. Although the prince himself remained in Phozon, he was kept away from the Order of the Tiger and could not move a single soldier, so there was naturally little chance of reinforcements being sent to Ende.

That something like that… Vileena nodded attentively.

Her grandfather's complexion did not look good. He looked as though he was dispassionately describing facts, but Vileena, who knew her grandfather well, could see the distress that occasionally flitted across his face.

Grandfather is worried as well.

Given Jeorg's personality, it was easy to guess that he was irritated by his son, Ainn's, weak attitude. He was also concerned about the confrontation between his grandsons. However, taking the country's future into consideration, and given that he had retired, he could not carelessly get involved, since that was one action that was sure to divide the country.

"Oh," as though suddenly waking up from a dream, her grandfather smiled at Vileena. "I ended up talking for a long time. I'll have them bring you your meal. Rest well tonight."

Not wanting to cause him any extra worry, Vileena abandoned the idea of any further conversation.

She finished her meal and laid down again in bed. Now that she was being still, her head throbbed dully to the rhythm of her heartbeat. As well as the impact from falling from her horse, she had probably reopened the wound to her head that she had received near the Mephian border.

Again… Vileena suddenly thought as she touched the fresh bandage that was wound around her head. *I'll have made Theresia worry again, won't I?*

She had been injured when she had flown from Apta and headed alone to Taúlia. She had been scolded by Theresia afterwards. This time too. Going together to Solon was one thing, but when she learnt that the princess was going to lead a military troop to meet with Salamand, Theresia had nearly swooned.

"Princess… Well, Princess. Princess!"

Maybe it was because her head was too muddled up, but she had only been able to keep repeating the same thing.

“Theresia, even if you object by saying that I’ll be going alone, the emperor has lent me a hundred soldiers.”

When the princess had announced that with deliberate pride, Theresia’s face had gone even whiter. Soon, she would have been saying “I will go too”. For Vileena, persuading Theresia was far more difficult than bargaining with the emperor.

“It’s alright,” Vileena had assured her with a smile. “Salamand has raised me up as his great cause. Even in the worst case, he won’t be able to kill me.”

Theresia had probably been feeling that her lifespan kept been shortened again and again. Thinking that it was her fault, naturally Vileena’s heart ached; but, strangely enough, every time they met again, Theresia looked rejuvenated. Maybe it was a case of feeling better afterwards? Still lying down, Vileena smiled.

…

Her bedroom was surprisingly quiet at night. It was hard to believe that Zaim Fortress had once been the stage of so many fierce battles.

It was the profoundly memorable land where Princess Vileena herself had been led by Ryucown’s soldiers and had confronted Ryucown in person.

Just before that, she had vehemently disagreed with Crown Prince Gil. Although he had gone there at the head of the soldiers, for a long time, Gil had sat and done nothing. Even when the Garberan army and Ryucown’s forces were clashing against one another, he did not send reinforcements and simply spent some time watching intently. Vileena had criticised him for that. She remembered it well.

The crown prince had been allowing a situation that was costing lives to continue. “If you just let that pass like this, those soldiers will die in vain. Aren’t you the one who hated wasting their lives for the sake of the nation and its nobility?” When Vileena had cut into him however, his expression had clearly changed and he had been visibly shaken.

He, who always seemed to gaze at things with calm and detachment, had something about him that was boyishly fragile and childish – and surprisingly enough, that part

of him was neither hidden nor far from the surface.

Gil Mephius.

She only had to lower her eyelids and there, on the other side of them, the figure of him, arms crossed and plunged in thought, appeared as though it were natural.

He was probably like that even now. Without revealing the inner part of his heart to anyone, he was definitely worrying about how to continue fighting Emperor Guhl from here on, or how to deal with Allion's might appearing from the east, or about all sorts of other things.

What Grandfather is to me – the prince doesn't have anyone like that.

The thought that had suddenly crossed her mind during her conversation with her grandfather had not left it since then.

Vileena opened her eyes several times and stared fixedly at the ceiling that she could just dimly make out.

Then, every time, she lowered her eyelids again.

Vileena Owell unexpectedly felt as though her heart was being tightly clenched. Why was it that when she closed her eyes, the figure of Crown Prince Gil, with his arms folded and his head bent in deep thought, now looked like a wretchedly lonely boy with nowhere to return to?

Unloved by his father, having lost his mother, and held in contempt by the retainers; the boy had risked his life, pushed forward with meticulous preparations, swept away the enemies before him, and had, little by little, increased his fame and influence. Yet wherever he went, he was still lonely.

That's exactly like…

Like a gladiator, who spent every day killing today's enemy as he had been ordered to, then sleeping in preparation for tomorrow's fight, wreathed in the inerasable stench of blood and viscera.

The candle's flame flickered above the wooden table. His head bowed, the angle of Gil's figure had changed somewhat, although Gil himself had not stirred in the

slightest, his back slightly hunched and still plunged in thought.

Can you find your answer?

Vileena unconsciously asked the illusionary Prince Gil.

Day after day, you're racking your brains, thinking only about how to win the fight. It's as though, if you lose – that one defeat will mean losing everything, and all that will be left afterwards is to prepare for death. What is it that you are looking for beyond that? You who doesn't confide in anyone, who doesn't share your heart's secrets with anyone, who doesn't walk in the warm sunlight with anyone, what kind of answer do you crave?

She wanted to yell at that hunched up back. She wanted to kick the impassive Crown Prince from behind. And at the same time –

She wanted to hug his back close.

She wanted to bury her cheeks into it, and twine her arms towards his waist and tell him –

It's alright.

It's alright to open your heart to me.

In this world, no matter who else was, she was not his enemy. She wanted to tell him that even if you are completely defeated and come back covered in blood, mud, and tears, you will definitely find arms to embrace you and a chest to hide your tears against – that person definitely exists.

Tears slid from beneath her closed eyelids.

Why?

Why was she realising so many things only after there was so much distance between them?

It was only after she could not call out to him directly, after she could not go to see him, that these overflowing feelings appeared, deep, and many, and suffocating.

At long last, Vileena fell asleep, unaware of her own tears.

Ten days passed. Vileena's health improved by the day and, by that time, she could get up normally and walk all around Zaim Fortress.

This was an area where, compared to Mephius, the climate remained relatively constant all year around, you could feel the changing of the four seasons, although it was not as marked as it was in the south – in the royal capital and at the detached palace. The season in which the winds blew fiercely had already passed, and a hint of autumn was slowly drawing closer.

Vileena spent her time looking up at the sky high above and at the mountain scenery. While doing so, she tended to become engrossed in thoughts of the prince. Each time that happened, she made a point of shaking her troubles out of her head.

Not surprisingly, she was extremely self-conscious regarding what had happened with Salamand. She was aware that if she were to do something unreasonable again now, this time, she would not only be putting herself in danger but would also be causing considerable trouble to those around her.

Of course, she did not feel that she should always be like this, but, to borrow the prince's words – *now is the time to wait*.

Then, when ten days had elapsed, the fortress become somewhat livelier. It had received information from Mephius which said that "Nedain has fallen to Crown Prince Gil's troops." Moreover, by attacking in waves and joining forces with the populace which had risen in revolt, they had achieved complete victory with practically no loss of military resources.

The soldiers serving at the fortress were astonished at the tactics used, but from Vileena's point of view, she would have been embarrassed if he had not done as much. Since that would have meant that her going especially to Solon, as well as pretending to be a warrior leading soldiers, would have been in vain. She couldn't deny that she felt a bit proud at having thought up that farsighted action.

Strangely enough, even the Garberan soldiers congratulated her when they saw her. A single girl had risked her life for the sake of a country; they saw no contradiction between the fact that the country in question had once been their enemy, and their pride that the girl was a princess from their own land.

However, now that Nedain had been taken, Solon, the imperial capital, was right in front of the prince's eyes, and there was a good chance that there would be even

greater disturbances in Mephius' future. Zaim, which was located at a key point near the national border, was enveloped in a greater sense of tension than usual.

Another two days later, an air carrier arrived from the direction of the royal capital. Contrary to what might have been expected, this did not herald the arrival of reinforcements sent to strengthen defence at the border, but was instead a single ship belonging to the Kotjun House. Riding on board was Rinoa Kotjun, the daughter of the current head of the family.

"Has the young lady of the Kotjun House come to sell some new kinds of weapons because it looks like war is near?" Some of the soldiers growled, but when Rinoa disembarked at the port, she immediately requested a meeting with the previous king.

Jeorg received the information while he was chatting after lunch with his granddaughter Vileena. "Oh, how unusual," his mouth curved into a slightly exaggerated pout.

Jeorg's connection to the Kotjun House ran deep. He was the one who had formally employed them – a family of miners and merchants – as Garberan retainers. Still, after Jeorg had abdicated from the throne, he and the Kotjun House had absolutely no contact apart from the messenger that they sent each year to present their congratulations on his birthday.

How very like the merchant-minded Kotjun House – actually, that had left Jeorg with a rather favourable impression. He believed that, even while they used their outstanding cunning and keen noses to make more and more money and to befuddle the courtiers, they were helping to make Garbera into a stronger country.

And now, there was a messenger from the Kotjun House. Or not, rather, as it appeared that Miss Rinoa had said: "I am not here on behalf of the Head of the House, but wish to be granted an interview simply as myself, Rinoa Kotjun. This is both sudden and ill-mannered of me, but I am happy to wait as long as necessary for His Majesty, Former King Jeorg's, convenience."

Rinoa. That young lady, was it? Jeorg smiled faintly. The year before last, she had been the messenger who had come to congratulate him on his birthday. At the time, she would have been about sixteen or seventeen, but the fox-eyed girl had already exuded a personality befitting of a daughter of the Kotjun House.

"Let's see her," Jeorg had her brought immediately to a reception room.

At the speed with which he dealt with it, Vileena, who was next to him, keenly felt that – *that's a lot like His Highness Gil*.

Or in this case, would it be better to say that Gil was a lot like her grandfather?

In no time at all, Rinoa entered the room, presenting her compliments as she did so. For a moment, she was unable to hide her surprise at finding not only the former king, but also Princess Vileena; but, just as quickly, she smoothly sent to her greetings as well. Vileena returned them.

They had never been particularly close. Vileena had received invitations to Rinoa's parties, but there was not much compatibility between the princess, who was not good at handling the repartee at showy social gatherings, and the daughter of the Kotjun House, who shone brightly in that kind of setting. That didn't mean that they had a bad relationship. They just did not have that much contact. Each was aware of the other as someone whom they could not ignore, but whom they did not need to get closer to.

However, Vileena had learned that Rinoa had prepared the ship that Zenon had used when he was coming here to subjugate Salamand.

Rinoa claimed that this time, she had come all the way to Zaim because she was unable to endure the way that the confrontation between the two princes was paralysing the country, and so she had come to borrow Jeorg's wisdom.

"I am mortified at exposing something to my family's shame, but…"

"What is it then?"

"It is possible… no, it is certain that the one standing behind Prince Razetta is my father, the current head of the Kotjun House."

"That Dudley boy?"

Jeorg stroked his beard. When, as King of Garbera, he had first employed the Kotjun House as retainers, the head of the family had been Rinoa's grandfather, and he remembered the plump young man who had been at his side.

"Father has his eyes on an untouched vein of dragonstone lying within Mephian territory. It was largely thanks to the work of my father's faction that Salamand had so

many people to support him from behind."

Dudley had wanted to stir up another war against Mephius, but his plan had been thwarted by Zenon and Vileena. Moreover, Zenon had been insisting on sending reinforcements to Ende. If Garbera's attention were to turn in that direction, the situation with Mephius would be set aside. And if, during that time, Mephius discovered the existence of the vein, all Dudley's plans of making a huge profit would come to nothing.

Therefore, this time, Dudley had approached Prince Razetta and imbued him with various ideas so as to start chipping away at Zenon's influence at court. His aim was to, at all cost, once again turn the national mood against Mephius.

"I understand what you're saying, but," when Rinoa paused for a moment, Jeorg spoke heavily. "I'm retired. I can't suddenly start meddling now, when I haven't set foot at court in nearly ten years. I can't go preaching on about things there as if I knew best."

"But, Excellency…"

"King Ainn is the one in charge of steering the country. Miss Rinoa, I understand your concern for the country so much that it hurts, but don't put too much faith in an old man's meagre abilities."

Vileena listened to their exchange in silence for a while.

Has time already started to move? Should I help move it myself?

She believed that she needed to be careful not to go overboard with her own actions but, nevertheless, she had been born into royalty. She had decided to become Mephian, but, for now, she was undoubtedly still a princess of Garbera.

"Grandfather," Vileena interrupted. Her grandfather and Rinoa stopped their conversation and turned towards her. "I wish to leave at once," she announced.

Part 3

Three hours before he needed to be at the palace's Great Hall, Noue Salzantes was called to Prince Zenon's personal chambers.

That night was the eve of the Harvest Festival. Although even though it was called the eve of a festival, it was only a banquet to which nobles were invited. However, since it was being hosted by the king, First Prince Razetta would be attending.

At this point – was there no way to convince both the king and the First Prince at the same time, was what Zenon had been discussing with Noue since earlier.

"If I press them any further by myself, both my father and brother will just become more obstinate. Is there any way for you to lend me your help?"

"Unfortunately, I also went to Zaim Fortress. I'm also in His Majesty's bad books. A direct attack won't work."

According to Noue, it would be better not to attract attention at that evening's dinner party. He added that, at this point, Prince Zenon should give up on personally leading the troops, and that he should persuade the commanders who seemed like they might cooperate with him to volunteer themselves at some later date.

Zenon showed disapproval of the suggestion.

"It's a roundabout way of doing things. It'll take time. Will we even make it before Allion attacks?"

It was one thing to choose commanders and to stir them into action by appealing to their chivalrous spirits, but in order to not arouse the suspicions of the king and the First Prince, Zenon and Noue would have to remain behind the scenes. In other words, neither of them could move too openly and, consequently, everything would take time.

They were forced to be this cautious because, even now, although the matter with Salamand had been settled, the faction at court that was loudly clamouring for *revenge on Mephius* was still influential. And tall of them would get in Zenon's way to ensure that the mood within the country did not turn instead towards Ende and Allion. They were, no doubt, also the ones who had each individually worked on influencing Razetta, causing the originally politically moderate prince to convince the king to keep

the Order of the Tiger far from Zenon.

“Even though Vileena risked her life…”

It infuriated Zenon. He had no doubt that his little sister had put herself in danger not only to help Mephius out of a crisis, but also because she was determined to prevent Garbera from suffering war damages for no reason.

Ironically though, it was because of Vileena that the voices supporting war with Mephius had gained strength. Within Garbera, rather than the princess Vileena’s heroic actions, it was what had happened immediately after them which had caused the greatest impact.

The princess was shot by Mephian soldiers and carried back to Zaim Fortress.

The voices praising the princess were drowned out by those reviling Mephius.

The only ones, within Garbera, who had actually witnessed the scene of her being shot at were those from the Order of the Tiger. Zenon had, of course, issued a gag order, but, after all, not every mouth could be shut. Was it something that had spread through the ranks at Zaim after the princess had been carried in, or was it something that had drifted in from the Mephian side? Either way, it had swayed public opinion within Garbera considerably.

“That bastard Guhl – using our Princess for such a dangerous job.”

“Shameless!”

“He should have been the one to put on armour and deal with it. He’s nothing but a coward.”

Vileena’s actions had instead given an excuse for war against Mephius, and had caused the argument to become more heated. Which was why Zenon and Noue were worried. Not even the two of them could come up with a solution.

Then, just as the banquet was about to start, Zenon again called for Noue. This was not, contrary to what might have been expected, because he had come up with a good idea; after hurriedly giving greetings and ordering everyone else out of the room, he showed him a letter.

“This arrived for me.”

Noue opened it in silence. And then, that man whose face seldom expressed any emotion opened his almond-shaped eyes in rare and obvious astonishment.

The sender was Gil Mephius.

It had arrived via a messenger from the Haman Firm who had been told to hand it to Prince Zenon.

“The Haman Firm,” Noue murmured the name. “Certainly, that’s the organisation which can freely handle the greatest number of ships within Mephius. In which case, transporting ‘seven hundred soldiers’ from Mephius should not be impossible.”

“Do you think it’s the real thing?” Even as Zenon asked that, his lips curved with what looked like amusement. “In this situation, more than the letter being real or not, it’s whether the sender is the real thing or not.”

Opinions in Garbera were divided as to whether the crown prince who was currently causing trouble in Mephius was the real one or an impostor, but Zenon and Noue had arrived at a firm conclusion on the matter.

The reason for that was very simple: “Vileena is with him, so he can’t be an impostor.”

That being the case, there was a high chance that both the letter and its contents were also genuine. Gil’s letter stated that – *I wish to send seven hundred soldiers to entrust to Garbera*. In addition to this extremely abrupt offer, it continued – *Please add them to the reinforcements for Ende*.

The contents seem to indicate that he had, from the start, predicted that Zenon would move in reinforcement to Ende. Zenon could not suppress a wry smile. He read through the letter a second time.

“He can’t possibly have even seen through the fact that I’d be lacking soldiers.”

“From our point of view, they are definitely reinforcements. But if I may say something…”

“I know,” Zenon’s smile faded as he grimaced. “Even though the soldiers will be coming from an allied country, given the circumstances, I can’t let them into Garberan territory

on my decision alone. To say nothing of the fact that these troops are from Mephius. If I proudly flaunt this in front of the king, he'll suspect me even more of planning treason."



“Will this become our trump card or our downfall?” Noue seemed to be deep in thought as he placed a finger to his chin. “In any case, nothing will come of being hasty. We should delay making an official announcement so as to give the impression that Prince Gil’s letter is entirely unrelated to our intentions.”

Zenon could only agree with him.

In the end, having agreed that it was best to refrain from making any conspicuous moves, the two of them went to make their rounds of greetings at the banquet. Zenon was especially attracting attention from all around because of the antagonism with his brother. Whenever he approached any military officers, they would get tense, wondering – *Is he coming up to me to talk about something in particular?*

“That’s Lord Salzantes for you.”

The surrounding people were admirative.

“Who is he going to have surrender to him tonight?”

“Won’t it be Lady Bonaphalt? Her husband already passed away five years ago. It’s about time for her to regain her reputation as an amorous woman.”

“No, there were rumours involving her before already. The way I see it, his target is Viscount Lynton’s daughter.”

In a way, that might be how Noue got on in life, thought Zenon. As for Garbera’s second prince, however, although he was a man who was far more eloquent and knowledgeable when it came to courtly behaviour than, say, Mephius’ Prince Gil or Ende’s Lord Eric, he was also a man who, when he had a purpose, could not conceal it. He did not have a personality that allowed him to wear a carefree expression and sound things out indirectly, or to plan an approach while pretending to talk about trifles.

A wine cup in his hand, Zenon determinedly approached his father, the king.

“Your Majesty.”

I have to pick words that aren’t too direct – He had intended to be careful, but somehow or another, seeing his son approach him with raised eyebrows and zeal almost rising from his shoulders, the king seemed to sense something.

“Oh, Zenon. I’ve had a bit too much to drink tonight. Let’s save it for later.” Saying which, he showed signs of wanting to immediately move away from him. The king did not wish to get involved in an argument with his son in front of the retainers.

Zenon almost instinctively called out to him to stop, but managed to hold himself back. The retainers’ gazes followed the king’s figure until he had disappeared from their sight.

“Zenon.”

Prince Razetta called out to him from behind. With his current opponent suddenly appearing before him, tension showed on Zenon’s brow.

“Older Brother.”

“What did you say to Father?”

“Nothing. Just gave him my greetings.”

“Lately, His Majesty looks like he is constantly anxious. Don’t bring up needless topics with him.”

Didn’t I tell you I didn’t say anything… Zenon was on the verge of expressing anger, but, noticing the stares fixed on him from all directions, he made an effort to swallow it back.

There was a man close by Razetta’s side.

Dudley Kotjun.

That bastard.

Zenon and Noue were aware that this was the man who had been instilling “needless” thoughts into Razetta.

His older brother was the very picture of solemnity, and Dudley had thoroughly riled him up with his words.

“Don’t you think that, recently, Lord Zenon has been conspicuous in acting as though he held absolute power? Even though there has only just been that matter with

Ryucown. And he only laughs at the disturbances in Mephius. As the older brother, Lord Razetta, you must stand by His Majesty and guide the country in the right direction."

Razetta was the commander of the Order of the White Heron, which served both to guard the royal family and to police the capital city. He evidently viewed himself as a knight protecting the king and his politics.

Zenon, however, had heard about Dudley's real intentions from the latter's daughter, Rinoa Kotjun. *He's planning to cut away a part of Mephius for the sake of a vein of dragonstone* – she had said.

With Mephius currently rocked by the confrontation between the emperor and the crown prince, he believed that he could easily obtain some of its territory. Afterwards, he would pretend to have newly discovered the vein; therefore, in order to obtain the rights to it, he would take the initiative of loudly promoting an attack on Mephius. So as not to stand out too much, however, he would act while standing in Prince Razetta's shadow.

In Zenon's eyes, his older brother looked like Dudley's puppet.

"The country can't afford to turn its spears in every direction. You should calm down, abide by our father, the king's, decision, and demonstrate to everyone that there is no retainer more loyal than you. I'm repeating myself, but you mustn't approach either His Majesty or the other knights with needless topics."

When that older brother started preaching to him with a know-it-all expression, Zenon's patience snapped.

"How strange that you call it needless," he spat out the words and anger that he had swallowed back with so much difficulty. "Brother, you hold the important duty of defending the royal capital, don't you? You should be joining forces with me to convince His Majesty that we need to remove the threat of Allion."

"What are you saying? Stirring everyone up by going on about 'threats, threats', aren't you just inciting public opinion for your own convenience?"

"Are you trying to suggest, Brother, that I want to move the army purely for my own interest? That I, I…"

Zenon and Razetta were by no means brothers who got along badly. It was just that they had different personalities. They were not like, say, the two princes of Ende, Jeremie and Eric, who loathed each other and saw the other as an enemy to be defeated in order for themselves to become the future Grand Duke of Ende. Nevertheless, these past few days, they had both accumulated resentment and become entrenched in their positions.

And this chance opportunity led to an eruption.

Because the two of them were not used to quarrelling with each other, once they started, they could not stop the momentum. Carried away by their emotions, each started abusing the other.

T-They need to be stopped, quickly.

Witnessing this kind of scene for the first time, the nobles were at a loss.

Getting involved now will just cause suspicion. Both sides will demand to know which one you're on.

Even so, if it goes on like this…

"You've practically never even held a sword, Brother. And that's why you can't imagine the terror that is Allion. You think that the whole world begins and ends with what happens in this tiny capital town."

"W-What? I killed one of Mephius' twelve generals during my first campaign. You can't tell me you don't know about it."

"And you're not even embarrassed to be bringing out that blatantly exaggerated boast now?"

In a corner of the hall, Noue Salzantes wanted to bury his face in his hands. While patting the shoulders of the ladies who were clinging to him as though in fear, he considered his options. *If I intervene now* – Razetta would fix upon the fact that "you're Zenon's ally after all," and it would obviously become increasingly difficult for him to do anything.

No matter how much he racked his brains, the man known as Garbera's most resourceful general did not know how to deal with this kind of "battle".

The exchange between Razetta and Zenon was getting increasingly heated. Even stories from their youth were being flung around and, with the likes of “You’ve been like this since way back when,” or “Brother, you’ve been like that since you were a child,” it was taking on the aspect of a mudslinging contest.

Which was when –

“My, it’s very noisy tonight.”

A high-pitched voice came from near the entrance to the hall.

“Even if it *is* the eve of the Harvest Festival, don’t you gentlemen think that you are being a bit too rowdy?”

There, where everyone turned to look, was a woman. The dress she was wearing truly looked as though it had been prepared for the occasion but, actually, she had not been planning to attend this party. As soon as she alighted in Phozon, she had to have whatever clothes were available prepared for her.



Dudley Kotjun frowned.

Walking towards the middle of the hall, her high heels clacking loudly, was his daughter, Rinoa Kotjun.

“Hello to you, Miss Rinoa.”

With the king being nowhere to be seen, Razetta, as the one in charge, gave her a half-hearted greeting. He was still wound up however, so when Rinoa took a haughty tone with him, he was unable to stay quiet.

“How could you be crying and squawking in front of the retainers? What would happen if His Majesty heard about it? It is the host’s duty to create an atmosphere in which everyone can laugh and drink without a care.”

“This is a discussion concerning the future of the country. Pardon my impoliteness, but it is not something that a woman such as yourself should be intervening in.”

“Is that so? Than I do not know if here is the right place for me to pass on the message that I received for you gentlemen.”

“A message?” Zenon knit his eyebrows. “…Oh, now that you mention it, I heard that you went to Zaim, Miss Rinoa. If I’m not mistaken, our previous king, His Former Majesty Jeorg, was also going there at around the same time. Did he say something to you?”

“Certainly, I spoke with His Excellency. The message that I was entrusted with, however, was not from him. It was from Her Highness, Princess Vileena.”

“What!?”

That was not only Zenon and Razetta’s voices. The entire hall had the same reaction, before being engulfed in commotion.

“The message, it c-can’t be,” Zenon’s voice unintentionally went hollow, “has Vileena’s condition gotten worse? Is my little sister’s health…”

“Please be at ease, Your Highness,” Rinoa seemed to be amused at how shaken Zenon was, “she is as healthy as can be. When I went to Zaim, she was enjoying a pleasant chat with His Majesty, Former King Jeorg.”

“Oh, i-is that right?” Zenon heaved a sigh of relief.

The people within the hall also broke into smiles. Given that only moments before, the quarrel between brothers had seemed to suddenly engulf Garbera in dark clouds, their reaction now was proof of how much the little princess was loved in her home country.

Rinoa, though, still had another trick up her sleeve.

“…It’s just that the princess has left Zaim. We travelled together by air carrier and have just alighted in Phozon.”

“What, in Phozon?”

Once again, everyone burst into noise.

Oh!

As they exchanged glances, more than surprise, it was unexpected joy that showed on their faces.

The princess has returned?

Princess Vileena?

Just from knowing that fact, it was as though the dark black clouds had parted and the sun was suddenly shining brightly within the hall.

Ainn Owell, who had, for a moment, been returning to his own chambers, had also heard the ruckus and had been notified by a page.

“What, Vileena? You say she’s back in the royal capital?” Ainn hurriedly returned to the hall.

Paying no attention to the retainers, who were thrown into confusion by the king’s return, he fixed his eyes on Rinoa’s face.

“Vileena… Where is she right now?” He asked breathlessly.

Rinoa smiled.

“She is in the air carrier. However, she has stated that she cannot move from there for now.”

“Why, why is that? Even though she’s come back to her own home, why can’t she move?”

“The princess has taken a firm oath. On the other hand, she has graciously entrusted me with her words. However, as His Highness, Prince Razetta, has said that he does not wish to hear the words of a mere woman, I am in a quandary about what to do.”

“T-That wasn’t what I meant.” Razetta shook his head.

Ainn tilted his head, apparently not quite sure what was going on. “That pesky girl, what is she up to this time? Anyway, Rinoa, what did Vileena ask you to say?”

“Yes. Well then, although I worry about doing so, I, Rinoa, will speak in her place.”

Rinoa gave a slight bow then swept her gaze over King Ainn and Prince Razetta, then, lastly, looked at Zenon.

“First, to my brother – the commander of the Order of the Tiger, Sir Zenon Owell – I wish to express my deepest gratitude.”

“Gratitude?” The one whose name was called out opened his eyes round.

“Yes. Since Brother was quick to notice Salamand’s schemes and to deal him a blow at Zaim, that wicked traitor was prevented from the start from acting on too large a scale. Thanks to that, it was possible to capture him in Mephius. There is no denying that, if it had not been for my brother’s valour, there is a very high chance that Salamand would have trampled through Mephius without restraint, and, in doing so, would have caused our two countries to revert back to a dark and bloodstained future. Had that of happened, I, Vileena Owell, would have lost both a land to return to and my home, and would have found myself all but thrown into the wilderness.”

“…”

This is… Zenon exchanged a glance with Noue, who was drawing up to him.

Her face expressionless, Rinoa continued –

"After ten unhappy years of war, and after exchanging vows to live as good neighbours, His Excellency Emperor Guhl Mephius naturally does not wish for any further quarrels with Garbera. As proof of that, when I, Vileena Owell, asked to be sent to Salamand as a messenger, he willingly listened to my appeal. Not only did he provide me with armour made to my size, he also sent a hundred hand-picked Imperial Guards with me with which to punish that vicious rebel."

Within the hall, the commotion had died out and the whispers had dwindled to nothing; instead, stillness and quiet reigned.

Noue believed that by emphasising from the start that Salamand had been stopped by the princess herself, her words were probably intended to soften the signs of the anti-Mephius feelings that were still smouldering within Garbera.

Although Vileena had avoided statements that portrayed her as being herself Mephian, there was no denying that she was including herself in the "Mephius" that she talked about, and that she was painting an image that was very far removed from the one that many people in Garbera still held of an enemy country that had once shed their people's blood.

That's true.

Princess Vileena is in Mephius now.

That very obvious fact was something that they realised anew, now that they had been made to think about it.

As expected from our gallant princess.

She borrowed a hundred soldiers from that Guhl!

Isn't it exciting? I wonder what kind of expressions Guhl and those obstinate Mephian officials were wearing?

The impish girl who had flown all around Garbera, who had taken part in the airship race, and whose somewhat troubling actions they had watched over with affection, had reappeared in Mephius. With that realisation, at least among the retainers in the hall, the desire to attack Mephius visibly started to fade.

It was unclear whether Rinoa was aware of the feelings of the people there, but, after

clearing her throat –

“There is one more thing that Her Highness, the princess, would like to tell everyone.”

“Speak,” Ainn urged her. His expression was somewhat subdued.

“I have heard that a rumour has spread throughout Garbera that I was shot and wounded by Mephian soldiers. Every time I hear it, my heart aches more than if it had truly been injured. It is nothing more than a completely unfounded rumour. All that happened was that I foolishly got carried away, allowed my horse to go too fast, fell, and was injured. To prove the truth of that, after having set you all my greetings and my thanks, I will be returning to Mephius.”

“What?”

Perhaps Rinoa did not notice Ainn’s unintentional exclamation, as she did not shut her ripe red lips.

“I believe that there is no longer any cause for misunderstanding or strife between Mephius and Garbera. I look forward to seeing the close relationship between those of Garbera and Mephius once the marriage ceremony has been celebrated. Moreover, in the Nouzen Mountains, His Highness, Gil Mephius, met directly with General Zenon and with Prince Eric, the future Grand Duke of Ende. His Highness Gil is fond of saying that when we get married, he hopes that my brother and Lord Eric will be present at the ceremony, so that they may renew their promise of a prosperous future for Mephius, Garbera and Ende. I too eagerly await that day.”

Having arrived at that point, Rinoa finally stopped talking.

For a while, nobody said anything.

While King Ainn Owell also preserved the same silence, he fixed his gaze on one particular point. Aware of where the king was looking, all of the retainers turned their eyes in the same direction.

The landing place for air carriers.

Although they could not see her, Vileena was definitely there. Her presence seemed to be carried with the warm wind that was blowing.

Finally, King Ainn gave a short sigh.

“That tomboy,” he muttered, his smile really quite pained. “Did you hear, all of you? With a hundred Mephian soldiers following behind her, my daughter Vileena apparently donned armour and went to the front. A glorious first campaign for a princess. I shall have the court painter summoned at once to draw this historic scene.”

Everyone there smiled. Keenly aware of the changes within the atmosphere at the Royal Court, Dudley called out loudly in a greasy voice.

“P-Please wait, Your Majesty! While Princess Vileena has always been dauntless and brave, she is in no way a soldier, yet the emperor of Mephius allowed her to experience such danger without batting an eye. He sent the precious princess, given into his care by another country, to quell those savages whose blood had rushed to their brains – it’s unheard of! A strong protest needs to be…”

“Those savages whose blood had rushed to their brains were Garberan, Sir Dudley.” Noue Salzantes stepped forward. Maybe blood was now rushing to Dudley’s brain, since steam seemed to be rising from the top of his head. Noue’s expression, however, was as cool as ever. “This is not an issue that can be settled with having Mephius take sole responsibility.”

“Don’t barge your way in, Noue.”

When the king admonished him, Noue respectfully stood back with an “Aye.”

“I was at fault for not seeing through Salamand,” King Ainn said quietly. “The ones who cleaned up after my mess were my son, Zenon, and my daughter, Vileena. However… although he is a prince, Zenon is also no more than a retainer. Razetta,” he called out to his oldest son.

Razetta looked up as though he had just been hit. “A-Aye.”

“What you said before is also reasonable. Zenon needs to be punished for having moved troops on only his own judgement.”

“Aye…” Razetta raised his voice in bewilderment.

“In order to prove his loyalty both to myself and to Garbera, Zenon must, this time, carry out his military duties on my orders. Zenon Owell, Commander of the Chivalric

Order of the Tiger!"

"Aye!"

Zenon stepped forward and clicked his heels. the king looked straight into his son's tense face.

"Gather your soldiers immediately and head to Ende in reinforcement. I will send a letter to Lord Eric, the future Grand Duke. I will not listen to any complaints that you have only just subjugated Salamand. You are to achieve military victory without fail."

"Without fail!"

At the prince's reply, the hall shook with cheers. Noticing the prince's gaze, the young lady of the Kotjun House smiled a little bashfully, but also a little proudly.

Dudley Kotjun's expression, on the other hand, was sour. His own daughter had gotten in the way of his golden opportunity, leaving him with complicated feelings. Although he had been advancing things according to his own hopes, he had also, from the start, set Razetta in front of him so as to avoid standing out too much. The way had he unthinkingly called out to King Ainn was an unforeseen incident, and it would not do to expose his intentions any further.

With that said, he was an old fox of a merchant. He immediately adjusted himself to the surrounding atmosphere, smiling and clapping his hands, while working out his next plan in his head.

"You have His Majesty's orders," said Razetta as he clapped Zenon on the shoulder. "We may have had a difference of opinion earlier, but since you've been granted a chance to prove your loyalty to His Majesty, there's nothing more to be said. Give it your all."

"I agree, I said too much earlier."

Watching as the two brothers shook hands, King Ainn secretly heaved a sigh of relief. His greatest worry in this matter must have been that the confrontation between the two of them might come to a head or be prolonged. His attitude had invited the quarrel that had broken out in the great hall but it seemed that things had now been settled, and that both brothers had been able to preserve their honour.

You saved me again.

His little sister's face appeared in Zenon's mind. Still, doing things this way – not showing herself directly and entrusting her words to Rinoa – did not seem like Vileena. Even the contents of the message had not reflected the straightforward way of talking that she preferred.

Since it'll soon be the Autumn Harvest Festival… it'll soon be Vileena's birthday too – Zenon suddenly realised.

She'll be fifteen soon.

Fifteen, is it?

Zenon turned his gaze towards the direction that the king had been looking at earlier.

Chapter 4
Torrent

Part 1

Two days after the Eve of the festival, Prince Zenon showed the king the letter he had received from Gil Mephius. It said that the troops he was preparing to dispatch in reinforcement to Garbera did not belong to Mephius. The ships the soldiers were riding on were already anchored at Apta and, if permission was granted, they could be in Garberan territory within a few days.

King Ainn Owell gave his permission.

At about the same time that a thousand two hundred knights from the Order of the Tiger returned to the royal capital, a great many ships bearing the emblem of the Haman Firm on their hull swooped down into Phozon's port. Riding in the separate crafts were seven hundred soldiers, horses and dragons, and a number of weapons.

Zenon had gone to greet them in person, and what burst into his sight was a group of burly, muscular warriors with a wild air and equipment in shapes that he had never seen before. They brought with them the feel of the west in which Zenon had never set foot.

The man in their lead descended the gangway and held out a massive arm to shake Zenon's hand. When the Garberan prince responded, his hand was grasped so tightly that he grimaced.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Sir Zenon Owell. I'm Moldorf of Kadyne, from the allied nations of Tauran."

He seemed to be in his fifties, but the massive muscles in his large body spoke of how he lived for battle.

"Brother, this is Garbera?" A man who looked a lot like Moldorf alighted and came to stand beside him. "I never thought that I'd set foot in lands further east than Mephius in all my life. Later, we'll have to buy souvenirs for Princess Lima. I wonder if we can

load enough in the ships?"

"Oi, Nilgif. Aren't you first going to greet the prince?"

Oh! Nilgif nodded and also shook his hand. He too did not seem to know his own strength. And on top of that, while on board, he had been drinking to his heart's content, so he reeked of alcohol.

These are warriors from the west?

As he shrank back while greeting him, something like grievance flashed through Zenon's mind.

The reinforcements that Gil Mephius had dispatched were soldiers from the western lands of Tauran.

Several days earlier, Lord Ax of Taúlia had received a messenger from Gil. "Please gather five hundred soldiers and send them to Garbera. I will provide the ships, provisions, and funds for all of them," he had requested.

At first, Ax Bazgan was going to comply by sending soldiers only from his own country. Previously, he had, also at Gil's request, arranged for a thousand soldiers to take up position near the border with Mephius. They had flown the many flags of Tauran, but half of them had been from Taúlia. So he was simply going to move them as is, when the strategist, Ravan Dol, had made a suggestion.

"My liege, should you not issue a command to all the other countries? Even if only few in number, each should send some soldiers. It would also be best if the commander were not from Taúlia."

After a long history of war, the west was finally starting to unite as one. However, a land in which skirmishes had been common occurrences could not simply change overnight.

Ravan believed that *we should take every opportunity to work together and deepen our solidarity*. Since Mephius would shoulder the entire cost of this campaign, it should be seen not as a burden, but as a boon.

As a result, soldiers had come from each of the countries.

From Taúlia, a hundred cavalrymen led by Natokk, the commander of the Sixth Army Corps.

From Helio, three hundred foot soldiers led by Bisham, a company commander of infantry.

A combined artillery force made up of fifty riflemen each from Lakekish, Fugrum and the Pinepey tribe.

And finally, from Kadyne, the Red and the Blue Dragons with two hundred cavalrymen and dragoons.

Coming together to form a single army, they departed from Apta on board of three separate cruisers. They had then travelled to Phozon, stopping on the way to resupply at the port of Mavant.

Zenon once again contemplated the appearance of these people from the west. And indeed, although the colour of their skin and their facial features were all quite similar, there were differences in the weapons and armour of each country. But for all that it was a mish-mashed assembly of troops, they showed no trace of any mutual wariness as, one after another, they alighted chatting together in Garbera's port. Taúlians laughed when those from Helio told a joke, and when those from Lakekish showed off their new model of guns, those from Fugrum boasted that the improvements that their own country had made to the old models were much more convenient.

They say that for a long time, the small nations in the west repeatedly fought against one another. Zenon Owell was conscious of a being deeply moved in a different way. *Yet at a single call from Gil Mephius, they rise to action together like this?*

He learned that Crown Prince Gil had become a bridge to the west. And also, that Ax Bazgan had destroyed the sorcerer who had been laying waste to the west and had created an alliance between all the countries there.

Part of the reason for that was because the people were tired of the never-ending strife. Zenon, however, knew little about the west, and seeing such a huge change right before his eyes, he could not help but feel deeply moved.

Meanwhile – *Maybe this is what they call the torrent of history*. Standing behind Zenon, Noue Salzantes was pondering over the same thing. *As history streams along and reaches a large bend, all of a sudden, a new current crashes into it, with enough force to*

crush boulders and tear away part of the shore. The swells turn into wider ripples than what could have been imagined from either, and produce massive changes. The people who are caught up in it sometimes fight it, but the end result is that they adapt to the flow with almost terrifying speed.

Was it because people were resilient, or because they were inconstant? Even if the shape of good and evil changed daily, or the gods they believed in or the name of their liege changed every month; as long as the sun rose the next day, the people of the land would till their fields, happily drink together at night, grieve over the death of a neighbour, and smile when they heard that a relative's daughter was getting married.

Perhaps this too is a great swell. Great changes will occur, to which people will have to adapt. Not only in the west, but also in Mephius, in Ende – and of course, Garbera will be no exception.

The direction that Noue looked towards then was that of the ship departure point that stood on the opposite side of the royal palace from the port in which they currently were. The Kotjuns' ship on which Rinoa had ridden was still docked there.

And Vileena Owell was still on board.

She would be leaving this afternoon and, after returning to Zaim, she would wait for a suitable time to "go home" to Mephius.

In the end, since arriving in Phozon, the princess had not once stepped off the ship. *You are splendid, Princess* – even the sarcastic, sharp-tongued Noue was unstinting in his mental praise for her.

For all that she had been born and raised in the royal family, she was still a girl in her mid-teens. She must have wanted to meet her parents whom she had not seen for so long, to hear the voices of her acquaintances, to talk face-to-face with her brothers. However, even when she had received an offer to do so from her father the king, the princess had not disembarked from the ship.

Noue surmised that it was a demonstration of her resolve as one who had already pledged herself to be separated from Garbera for all eternity, but she had probably also calculated that by not showing herself in person, she would actually be increasing the weight of her presence and the impact of her words.

Noue was not a man with a heart as hard as ice. He was conscious of a heat in his

breast. That heat was urging him to confess to the princess that he had once been going to kill her, and to apologise for his own foolishness.

Humph – Noue's lips curved as he played with his long hair. *At the time, there is no denying that I believed that doing that was for Garbera's sake. Besides, there's no point to even me becoming infected with the royal family's almost idiotic honesty*.

Noue glanced at Zenon Owell, who still seemed to be in the grip of some deep emotion before the western warriors.

Great swells are all very good, but when things change, they inevitably also distort. For light to continue shining on the land, there also needs to be those who shoulder the darkness. If I'm also an idiot, then I won't be the same kind of idiot as His Highness Zenon or Princess Vileena, nor, obviously, can I allow myself to be like Ryucown, an idiot whose judgement is clouded. I will be the idiot who deliberately looks at what should not be seen, and who pretends not to see what is clearly visible.

There was naturally no way for Noue to realise it, but at the same time as he was gazing from the opposite direction, there was someone who was gazing right back towards him.

Vileena Owell.

Did His Highness Gil take action?

Vileena could, of course, well imagine that the reinforcements from the west were connected to Crown Prince Gil. It was definitely something that only he could have done. Definitely. But still, there was a question that she could not shake off.

Why did he deliberately send them to Garbera?

It was directly tied to a strong anxiety which had first gripped her right after Gil had seized Nedain. Rumour had reached Garbera that the emperor had sent him a direct messenger. Recognising that the enemy commander, whom he had labelled an 'impostor,' was 'the crown prince', in other words his own son, Emperor Guhl had invited him to Solon.

What does the prince intend to do? The same questions which had been debated in Nedain swirled around in Vileena's mind.

If he went to Solon, he might fall into the emperor's trap and be executed. If he did not go, he would inevitably be branded a rebel who was needlessly prolonging the civil war.

Perhaps…

Sending reinforcements from the west to Garbera might have been a way to ensure that relief reached Ende in a situation in which he himself was unable to personally move.

Vileena's heart throbbed.

The prince intends to go to Solon.

They had not known each other all that long, but Vileena was convinced of it. That, it being the prince, he would surely choose a direct confrontation with the emperor.

In that case, there was nothing that the third princess of Garbera could do to stop him. She could not even curb the desire which was swelling within her to return at once to Mephius. However, could she go back to the imperial capital as things were now? She was worried that her presence might instead become a hindrance for the crown prince.

Immediately returning to Solon might simply cause needless confusion. Should I travel south from Mavant and go through Apta or Birac?

She worried alone, on board the ship.

As dusk drew near, the world steadily continued to move. Just as Noue had, Vileena felt great swells within it. It was depressing to think that oneself alone was so powerless before the huge, black waves that would determine the course that history would take in the coming era.

No, since we're in the middle of a huge whirlpool, I have to grasp the oars tight and pierce through the waves, or else my existence will be swallowed up in no time flat.

That enthusiasm was certainly like her, but, for a moment, her expression clouded over as she thought not of how the world was moving, or of the crown prince of Mephius, but of herself. "What is my 'real face'?" An unconscious murmur spilled from her lips.

In the past, she had talked about it with her grandfather, Jeorg.

Just as though they were performing parts in a play, people put on the masks of the roles and positions that they are given. There are those whose faces of flesh gradually disappear. There are those become one with the mask.

You're also my granddaughter, Ainn's daughter, and Garbera's princess. You might be someone's best friend, and someone's enemy. Before long, you'll become someone's lover, someone's wife, and someone's mother.

Each time they add onto your face, you mustn't turn away. It's fine to think, it's fine to be lost, but you must never run.

Vileena was not going to disembark and go to the royal palace. The reason was exactly as Noue had guessed. It was in order to demonstrate her resolve, and also because she had calculated that people's hearts would be more greatly touched if she deliberately avoided appearing in person. And, just as Zenon had felt, this was not an action that would have been like her in the past.

Is this my 'mask' as the princess of Garbera and a future Mephian?

One could not forever act as one's heart dictated. Theresia had surely also said it. That this was what it meant to become an adult.

As one born into royalty, Vileena intended to always endeavour to be upright and honest. Because that was how her grandfather appeared to her. However, and precisely because she was royalty, she believed that she had to be able to make use of her 'real face' and of her 'mask'.

Those chosen cannot live only for themselves. For her grandfather, her father, her brothers and, of course, for Vileena herself, this was the fate that they had been born with. And of course, it must be the same for Gil Mephius. Wasn't that why he went around looking lost and floundering?

Have I ever seen his 'real face'? The thought suddenly occurred to her. Gil Mephius' figure, arms crossed and alone in the dark, flickered faintly through Vileena's mind.

Part 2

Back in Solon, the lords and retainers were looking at each in bewilderment. Which was perfectly understandable given that, just as the war of words between the emperor and Crown Prince had seemed as though it were finally about to draw to a close, the emperor had ordered the prince to "Undress and show me your back." It was utterly out of the blue, and utterly bizarre.

Perhaps Gil Mephius was feeling the same way, as still kneeling, he remained unmoving for a while.

"…Why that order?" He finally asked.

Guhl Mephius alone was behaving as though this was all completely normal.

"Although you are not dead, there are those who will claim that you are not the living Gil Mephius, but an impostor."

"That…"

"I am a parent. I need only see my son with my own eyes to know whether he is the child of my own blood, or some impostor of unknown birth masquerading as the crown prince. But that, in turn, means that there are many who cannot understand it."

Guhl continued, "Gil's back bears a particular birthmark. Show it to those here. Clear all suspicions, and then no one will voice any objections to you once again occupying the empty seat belonging to the crown prince."

What Gil Mephius – what Orba heard even louder than Guhl's resonant voice was the beating of his own heart. It was perfectly clear that the order to show his back was nothing less than an order to *show your slave brand*.

At some point, Guhl Mephius had learned of his real identity.

Orba could feel the hairs at the back of his neck standing on end. He was aware of a cold sweat covering his entire body. It was as though innumerable blades had been thrust at his throat, his heart, his back and at the nape of his neck.

Meanwhile, nobody present at court, except perhaps Orba, had received a greater

shock than Princess Ineli Mephius. She too understood her step-father's true intentions. It was obvious that the emperor knew that this "Gil" was an impostor. And furthermore, he had already grasped that he was of slave origin.

This is…

This was outside of her calculations. It was fine if in all Mephius, only she knew of his real identity. Because if that were the case then, through him, she might be able to obtain the power to move not only Mephius but also the rest of the world.

"Y-Your Majesty…"

Ineli tried repeatedly to speak, but her lips trembled in the tense atmosphere; and the emperor, who only a short while ago had seemed so small, now once again seemed to stand in the way as an insurmountable obstacle, so that her voice could not seem to reach open air.

"What's wrong?" Guhl asked. On the other hand –

"Pathetic."

"What?" He turned back towards Orba, his face livid.

"Even though you just said that you only needed to see my face, are you now saying that in reality, you are not absolutely certain? To not be able to recognise your own son and to harbour such doubts – it is pathetic. If that is the case, then your keen eyes that can see through the hearts of people must surely have become clouded."

The cold he felt now was not only sweat; it was as if the blood running through his veins had turned to ice. His limbs had gone stiff, and he was frozen to his fingertips. And on top of that, he could not make a sound. He did not have so much as a single arrow or a dagger at hand, so he could not fight. If his voice ran out, it meant that his life would be cut short.

And yet –

"Don't play with words," Guhl slapped down his resolve. "You must be aware of the rumours going around in Solon that you are an impostor. Why did you come here? Was it not to clear away all doubts and prove your innocence? I've told you that everything will be settled once you show your back. What is there to hesitate about?"

Guhl spoke in a relaxed tone of voice. His attitude was every bit that of the ruler of a country, and it was impossible to see Orba, still unmoving and with his head bent, as anything but a slave who could only yield in front of such absolute power, and whose life was entirely in the emperor's grasp.

Compared to earlier, when he had displayed the momentum to blow the emperor's words away, the difference was remarkable. Guhl had deliberately lured the Impostor Crown Prince close. Because his plan had simply been to undermine the enemy's strength this way. Because he had all the ingredients to overturn the person before him and, in front of the retainers, to transform him into a pitiful loser with not a single accomplishment to his name.

"What's wrong?" Guhl asked again.

Orba, his head turned down, unconsciously bit strongly on his lip. One would think that things having come to this was entirely due to his lack of foresight... such was not the case.

He had come in full awareness that his life would be in danger. He had intended it as one final gamble. The boy who had been born and raised in a poor rural village, and who had survived a life of fighting as a slave, had been going to shoulder the burden of an entire country on his back. There was one last obstacle that needed to be overcome in order to pull off something so outrageous. And that was Guhl Mephius.

He had believed that he could fight. He had judged that he could overcome it.

Pathetic – Orba thought to himself, even as he almost trembled in humiliation. Could it be something this *pathetic*? Of all the secrets that he kept hidden, as far as Orba was concerned, it was for the most basic, the most *pathetic* reason that the mountain of corpses that he had built was going to effortlessly be torn down.

Somebody.

Orba was suddenly with the impulse to lift his head and look around at the nobles and generals gathered there.

Isn't there anybody? Somebody who would speak up. Somebody who would protest against the emperor and take my side?

It had to be said that when facing Mephius' army in battle, he had avoided calling on

western help and fought alone, even when he was at a disadvantage. Orba had forced time to move back then all for the purpose of acquiring allies here. That was the intention. Yet even so, the audience hall had fallen so silent that he could hear his own heartbeat.

Rather than being people unable to make a sound, they seemed to have killed their very breathing and did not give a single proof of even being alive. They were like a group of dolls that the emperor might have collected as a hobby.

No use? It wasn't enough? All those lives that were sacrificed, all that blood which was shed, and it still wasn't enough to move Mephius' time?

Orba was not aware of the veins standing out from his fist against the floor. He was also unconscious of the fact that he had closed his eyes. As though to escape from reality, to reject the words of truth, he blocked his own field of vision. In the darkness that descended, Shique's face suddenly surfaced in his mind.

It was followed by those of the generals who held the same identical determination, even though their families were being held hostage and might have their heads cut off or be sent to be eaten by dragons at any moment. The faces of countless young soldiers passed by.

And then –

"So that means you can't," said Guhl.

He stood up from the throne. The shadow he cast in that moment covered Orba's entire body.

"Then you, who cannot give proof of bring the crown prince, who are you? You who falsely took my son's name, who plunged Mephius into chaos, who are you?"

Who are you?

You...

You...

Who are you?

It ran endlessly in Orba's ears.

And also, his own voice, with which he had often asked himself –

I...

Who am I?

He, the gladiator, the ordinary boy, the crown prince. Those 'faces' which should have blended into one as they were gathered along the way sometimes, for some reason, seemed to oppose one another; sometimes seemed to insist on being separate existences, confusing and disturbing the personality that was 'Orba'.

You, who are you?

In Orba's world, which was bound in darkness, the colour of platinum shimmered and shone. The girl who had asked him that question straight out. While holding a gun that did not match at all with her soft white hands, while aiming it straight at Orba's chest, she had asked the same question as Guhl Mephius.

You, who are you?

Her words themselves seemed to turn into bullets that pierced through his heart.

Ah…

In that instant, a change appeared within Orba. The invisible blades thrust at his throat, back, and heart disappeared; the chill that paralysed his limbs was washed away. In its place, a fierce heat arose.

The heat, which was so different from the previous cold that it almost made him want to writhe in agony, was released from a single point in his chest and coursed to every extremity of his body.

"You won't answer?"

Amidst the ringing echo of Guhl's harsh voice, Orba opened his eyes.

His entire body was so hot that it was burning up. It needed some form of release. He felt as though if it didn't receive one, it would burn him to cinders.

“You…” Guhl Mephius, who had been about to probe him further noticed the change in his opponent in that moment. “You’re crying?”

The audience hall was shaking before his eyes.

It was just as the emperor had said.

Orba was crying.

His head still lowered, his tears were falling one after another. His rounded back was quivering incessantly, his shoulders were heaving repeatedly. His eyebrows, which had been slanted at an angle that made him look as though he would mercilessly cut down any enemy, were twisted painfully. While even the crease between his brows shook, Orba wept soundlessly.

“This…”

For a second, Guhl looked astounded, then immediately sneered.

Truly childish –

So said the expression on his face.

The dignitaries of Mephius were gaping open-mouthed as they gazed at the sobbing Crown Prince.

So was Ineli Mephius. The young hero who had temporarily driven the emperor into a corner and who had looked as though he might kick him from the throne at any moment was now crying like a child that had been harshly scolded by his father.

In the end, Gil had simply been dancing in the palm of his father’s hand, he had only been able to selfishly act as he had until now because his father had generously allowed it, and now that his father was coming down hard on him, he could not even protest against it. Such was the scene reflected in people’s eyes.

I get it.

Meanwhile however, Orba was immersed in feelings that the other people had absolutely no inkling of.

I finally get it.

Was that man's name Alnakk? He had originally been one of the Imperial Guards directly serving the emperor. And he had gone all the way to Birac, carrying the golden medallion which had been left in his care by Vileena Owell.

After having captured Salamand and conveyed that information to Garbera, while she was on the way back, Vileena had herself been shot at by one of the Imperial Guards. The bullet had missed the princess and had hit her horse, which had resulted in her being violently thrown to the ground. While her consciousness had been fading, her brother, Zenon, had carried her and declared that, for now, he was taking her back to Garbera. Vileena had nodded her consent, and, as though to leave it in Mephius in her place, had held the medallion out to Alnakk.

"Please take it… to His Highness Gil…" She had said.

When he had heard about it from Alnakk and received the medallion in his own hands, emotions that he could not understand had filled his heart.

It was the same thing now. The corners of his eyes had grown hot and his emotions were worked up to the point that he was shaking.

Why – he had wondered at the time. When Shique, the comrade-in-arms with whom he had faced death so many times, had died, he had been able to repress his feelings in public. It had been close. If Pashir and Alnakk had been even a little slower in leaving the room, they might have caught sight of his boyish, unconcealed face.

That much? Had the Garberan princess' existence become that important to him? To the point that he feared more than anything that her warmth would disappear far from him, just as Shique and his family had done.

There had been that, of course. There had been that, but it was not something that could be summarised in so few words. Back then, Orba had not yet realised the true nature of the fiery feelings that drove him on.

Now, however. In Solon, which was far from Birac. In this moment, when he was kneeling before the emperor, on the verge of defeat…

I finally get it. He thought. And also – *what a pathetic reason*.

When he had heard that Vileena had risked her life to intercept the invading Salamand, that she handed over her medallion for Prince Gil even as her consciousness was fading. When fighting the emperor face-to-face and finding himself at a loss for words. All that Orba could think was –

If only I was the real Gil Mephius.

Part 3

Perhaps anyone would have thought so at this point. That he had faced a great many hardships because he was a fake crown prince, and that it was because he had overcome them that he was who he was now. Up until now, he had fought constant battles, met a multitude of people, schemed, won, encountered setbacks, given shape to his intentions, and gone through all sorts of things; and yet, as though none of those mattered, here and now, what came to him was only that – the most meaningless, the most foolish, and the most worthless of words.

Yet Orba – swept away by the fiery torrent of his feelings and unable to do anything but weep – was unable to see things that way.

When Alnakk had handed him the medallion in Birac Fortress, he had felt as though he could hear Vileena's voice – I am with you.

Although I have left Mephius for a while, I am definitely not running away from your fight and mine. So…

So please, go at it with all you've got.

Wasn't it with that kind of meaning that Vileena had entrusted the medallion? It truly was becoming of the valiant princess.

Again and again, Orba had seen the princess before him like that and heard her voice, but the truth that *I am not Gil Mephius* was thrust at him anew.

That princess who had pushed on without looking back, and regardless of the danger to herself, would, of course, not suspect that this Prince Gil was an impostor. If she had suspected anything like that, she would surely never of risked her own life.

Generals Rogue and Odyne had chosen to fight even if it meant sacrificing their own families because they believed in Gil.

Likewise, the Mephian soldiers had taken the lives of their former friends and colleagues, had fought with swords grasped and guns held, because they believed in Gil.

Of course Orba was going to meet their expectations. He had to meet them. But… the

loyalty they offered, the friendship, and perhaps even the care –

Orba could only reward that sincerity with lies.

Always.

For all eternity.

He would give his name as 'Gil Mephius'.

He had known that. Yet, in this moment of impulse, he had been made to realise all that he had not understood.

Why was I born a village boy in the middle of nowhere? Why couldn't I have been born the crown prince? If I had that birth and lineage, I wouldn't be tormented by these feelings.

Although those feelings that could perhaps be called regret were genuine, at the same time –

There is definitely meaning to my being here, simply because I wasn't born to royalty or the imperial family.

– Those feelings, which flared up within him were also true.

Right. That's right.

When he once again became conscious of that worthless, pathetic thought, and while heat was coursing through his entire body.

I'd forgotten.

There were times when I thought exactly like the real Gil Mephius would.

And every time, it's that princess who reminds me. That I'm not the real thing.

And that's why. That's why I'm here.

Although he was prepared for both defeat and death, there was no reason for him to so easily give up victory and his own life to his enemies.

Orba's surroundings were light up by a blazing fire. The acrid smoke assailed his nostrils, the intense heat scorched his skin. As the houses on either side of him burned down and changed shape, a lone boy walked in the middle of them. Each of the tears that rolled down his cheeks dissolved in the heat.

If Rogue or Mephius' soldiers, or some subordinate somewhere, discover my brand…

You're an impostor!

How dare you deceive us!

You sent soldiers to their death for a lie, you influenced the course of our country with lies!

Even if they scream that at me – melted by the flames, the boy's face crumbled away and soon, it had transformed into that of Gil Mephius. There were no tears anymore. As though in exchange for the fury, for the anger, the hatred, and the flames that blazed brightly around him –

I'll laugh.

Orba – Gil Mephius' expression was serene.

I'll laugh as I insult them. You didn't notice. You didn't know. Even though an impostor was giving you orders, even though an impostor was trampling over your heads that you prostrated before him, didn't you still call me the crown prince? Didn't you tear the country apart on my orders? Then after it was over, didn't you receive medals from my own hand? The imperial family, royalty, that's all it's worth. Anyone would do. As long as they shoulder the weight in your place, as long as they look to the future in your place, anyone will do.

So I'll laugh.

I'll laugh even if countless hands grab me and drag me to the guillotine. Even in the middle of all that, I'll laugh.

I won't have any regrets. Who knows if after my death I'll be remembered in infamy as the false crown prince. But – But until then…

Until the moment when a blade slices through my neck or a bullet pierces my heart…

I'll resist.

I'll fight.

I'll give my all to survive.

"Enough."

As though bored of it all, Guhl Mephius gave a clap of his hands.

"If your tongue can no longer come up with an excuse, you'd do best to vanish from my sight at once." He looked around at the crowd of people in the hall. "Even though I had you gather here expressly, it turned into a farce. I had intended to offer you all souvenirs but, well, there have not been so many assembled here since the Founding Festival. The public finances can't cover it. What a headache," he joked.

Sitting beside him, Empress Melissa bit back a yawn. Ever since she had been informed that the crown prince had been summoned to Solon, she had seemed to consider that the matter was already settled. The exchange between the emperor and crown prince was, so to speak, no more than a scripted play that she had grown bored of, and she had been wondering for a while now when this tiresome show would be over.

"Your Majesty."

– A voice was heard.

Gil Mephius.

His head was still lowered, his back was still shaking.

"What?" the emperor asked, sounding fed up. "Have you brought yourself to comply with my order?"

"No."

At Gil's reply, even the retainers showed irritation and boredom in their expressions. Nothing would change, there would be no development. So why was this prince opening his mouth?

"I will not comply with it."

“Why?” Guhl, who had at some point sat back down on the throne, curled his lips into a sneer. “Is it because you don’t carry the proof on your body? That, in turn, is the best possible proof that you are an impostor.”

“Pathetic.” Orba said once again. “Truly a pathetic story. Do you intend to strip me naked and shame me before all of the retainers?”

The emperor harrumphed and shrugged. “This talk is tedious. I believe I told you not to play with words.”

“No, this is no wordplay,” so saying… Orba stood up.

He stretched out his knees which had been on the floor, lifted his bowed head straight, threw out his chest and faced Guhl.



Gil seemed to have shaken off the heavy black pall that hung from his shoulders and back, leaving it to roll at his feet, and the people there held their breath, unable to turn their eyes away from him; or better said, unable to turn away from the sight of the emperor and crown prince their gazes almost at equal height, facing off against one another.

Faster than Guhl could speak –

“In terms of words, I have said all I have to say. Why I was so late coming here, why I fought Mephian soldiers, as well as my determination. Since with that, I cannot gain Your Majesty’s acceptance, then that means that from the start, Your Majesty had no use for my existence.”

As Orba spoke, how did the people now see the single trail of tears that ran down his cheek? Orba himself, driven by fervent fire, could probably not tell whether the tears that fell were real or fake.

“While that may be true, even if you unjustly spurn me, I will not be trampled underfoot and defeated. Doing so would be betraying those who believe in me.”

“What?”

“Rogue Saian, Odyne Lorgo, Folker Baran, Yuriah Mattah. All of them are retainers that you, Your Majesty, raised. All of them are retainers who fought for you, Your Majesty, and consecrated their lives to you. Then why did they follow me and risk their lives fighting for me? Can you not believe in them, either? Do you doubt even the loyal hearts that they gave to their country and to you, Your Majesty? Seeing that attitude from you, how can the other retainers gathered here continue to believe in you, Your Majesty? Can you continue to guide this country?”

While he talked, Orba’s eyes dried and his eyebrows once again slanted as sharply as swords.

“By putting me to shame, you also shame their lives, their names, and their families. That is not something that I can allow. If such is your intention, I will return that shame to you, Guhl, you bastard, by not ‘complying with your orders’.”

“Shame me, you say?” Guhl’s beard shook imperceptibly.

This time, it was Orba who sneered.

“You can’t have forgotten, Father. I have Birac behind me. I have Nedain and Apta. And in them, I have the capable generals Rogue, Odyne, Folker and Yuriah, as well as a great many soldiers. I could have chosen the path of war. I could have turned Solon into a sea of flames and driven a blood-smeared sword through Your Majesty’s throat. The question of real or fake is meaningless on the battlefield. If the real Emperor were defeated by the impostor Crown Prince, in that very moment, the lie would become the truth, and the old truth would be cast away in history as a lie.”

The entire Court was left speechless as he spoke those terrible words with a smile. They felt as though they could see Gil Mephius’ face, stained red with the blood of his opponents. Was he not licking his lips because at any moment now, he would lick off that still steaming blood?

Right, the Gil Mephius who was here – the Gil Mephius whose gaze was at a height that matched the emperor’s – had without any doubt come through countless difficult battles, had bathed in the blood of his fellow countrymen, and now, to defend his own justice, he had clearly come to contend on this battlefield, not for the blood of his brethren, but for that of his own father.

“This late in the game you resort to threats?”

“Oh my, are you angry, Father? Then you should issue your commands. Retainers loyal to His Majesty, capture that fool and drag him to the dungeons – something like that.”

“What did you say?”

“But what if, at that time, I, Gil Mephius, gave an order?”

Orba spread his hands out towards the retainers who were arrayed on either side of him. They staggered and shrank back, exactly as though drops of fresh blood were raining incessantly from his fingertips.

“Don’t move,” wiping away his smile, Orba sent looks as sharp as the tip of a blade to the right and left of him. “If you move, you’ll be disobeying the orders of the next emperor of Mephius, and he’ll send you to the arena.”

Mephius’ vassals hurriedly straightened their posture and stood to attention. The smile returned to Orba’s lips.

“…Like so.”

“You bastard.”

Orba took a step forward.

Transparent ripples seemed to spread out from the tip of his foot trod. Those who were touched by those ripples did not move, could not speak, and could only gaze fixedly at the young man who was approaching the throne.

Guhl’s expression was finally torn apart with fury. His eyes, deeply carved wrinkles on either side, were riveted on Orba who came closer a second, then a third, step.

“This is no more than the desperation of a fool who cannot prove that he is the crown prince.”

“Are you afraid, Your Majesty?”

“What?”

“You should give your orders quickly. Capture the impostor, drag away the fool, kill the rebel. Why can you not do so? Right, Father, are you afraid? Because if nobody moves despite the order from their ruler, you would only be proving to all the dignitaries here that you no longer have the attributes of the emperor of Mephius. Then, Father, how would it feel to be defeated at your own hands? If nobody stops me, if nobody listens to Your Majesty’s words.”

Orba pressed forward by another step.

Ineli Mephius watched him, her gaze gleaming with perhaps even more fire than the emperor’s. Beside her, Empress Melissa had lost her composure and her eyes were darting about in confusion.

“Y-Your Majesty…”

Just as she unconsciously uttered those words, Gil Mephius arrived right in front of the steep steps to the throne.

People watched, holding their breath. Hoping that it might provide some kind of answer. It felt as though within the calm, caused by the weariness and fear that had swirled around the Court in exchange for a stable reign, a new wind was blowing, bringing with it who knew who and who knew what.

Then, Guhl Mephius once more stood up from the throne. The staff he held in one hand clattered as it fell onto the marble and, in exchange for it, Guhl's hand went to his breast pocket. When he pulled it out immediately afterwards, he held a gleaming black gun.

"Your Majesty!"

That appeal was not made by Melissa, but by several of the retainers, their voices overlapping. Holding the gun in both hand, Guhl had it aimed squarely at Orba's head. For a moment, Orba halted his steps.

"Fools, damn fools!" Guhl roared, opening wide the mouth that was buried beneath his beard. "I know your schemes perfectly well. You'll continue to be silent with those mouths that swore loyalty to me, and you won't run those swords that you dedicated to me through this rebel's back. In that case, I'll settle things myself. I'll use my own hands to defile this audience hall with blood. But! Know it well. What kind of fate do you think will befall you *loyal* bastards?"

The Court suddenly erupted into noise. Screams, roars, and strangely childish wails filled the hall.

And amidst it all – *The final gamble*, thought Orba. In that moment, he joined Guhl in sharing his sentiments.

There was one other…

Amidst it all, there was one other who decided to seize the situation to greatly affect their future. That person leapt from their seat, tumbled down the stairs, and arrived right before Orba.

Princess Ineli Mephius.

Ah – while people gasped, Ineli's slender body clung to Gil Mephius' chest.

Flinging herself between the emperor and the crown prince, in the empty space between where their swords seemed about to collide, as though she were Gil's shield, Ineli turned only her head around and shouted in a tremulous voice –

"Your Majesty. Your Majesty, please stop. For a father to kill his own child… Ineli can't bear it. Please, please stop!"

“Move from there, Ineli,” the emperor roared his order from above her.

“Move, Ineli,” the crown prince shouted the same thing.

Ineli however shook her head like a child throwing a tantrum, and clung to Gil more tightly than ever.

“How could Ineli not recognise Brother? How could Ineli just watch while you two fight like this? The two of you both worry about Mephius, about its retainers, its people, and its future, and that’s why you are colliding like this. Enough, enough. You can’t need to spill each other’s blood and take each other’s life!”

“Move, Ineli,” the emperor shouted again. The muzzle of his gun was still aimed true. “That is not the crown prince. That’s an usurper aiming for the throne. If you’re going to defend that kind of man, then…”

“Please, enough!” Ineli interrupted the emperor with a high-pitched shriek. “This person is the real Crown prince Gil Mephius. Ineli will prove it. Even if you reject my words and doubt my intentions, it’s all right. Please, please shoot me instead!”

For Ineli Mephius, this was a once-in-a-lifetime struggle. Up until then, she had been fixedly observing as the heated exchange between Guhl and Gil shook the Court and tilted it in favour of one or the other. When Gil attacked, the retainers’ expressions showed them wavering in favour of supporting this new hero; when Guhl shot him down through sheer overwhelming coercion, their expressions seemed to indicate that, after all, they had no choice but to dedicate their loyalty to the emperor.

And then, the moment when Gil once more gained the upper hand and struck down Guhl’s might.

Finally, when Guhl Mephius had proffered his threats. The emperor had previously thrown retainers who tried to advise him to the dragons and had been intending to execute the families of the veteran generals who had joined the crown prince. This had cast a black shadow in the hearts of the retainers who had served Mephius for so long.

For that reason, they were frightened. *If I do not obey the emperor, perhaps tomorrow I will become a dragon’s meal*.

And so, they were lost and hesitant. Should they continue to obey an emperor whose every word seemed to plunge Mephius’ future into darkness, their backs half-turned

away from the fight with the crown prince?

But then, Ineli took action. Their hearts, which had been split between two equal parts, only needed the resolute actions of one person to guide them towards one side or the other. And with it being not a hardened warrior who had many times overcome death, but a young girl whose pure soul lay concealed behind her snow-white cheeks, the effect was all the greater.

Guhl Mephius' face was twisted with hatred. Yet the aim of his muzzle did not waver.

"Your Majesty!" A voice reverberated – Indolph York.

He was a man who played a part in the anti-Emperor faction along with Fedom Aulin. He too had finally come to a decision. His voice quivering, he continued –

"I-I, Indolph York, beg of you. This person is clearly the true Crown Prince. Please lower your gun."

Ineli's actions and his words turned into the impetus for others.

"Your Majesty"

"Your Majesty!"

"Please, we beg of you."

"To attack even Her Highness the princess, it would be much too... too cruel."

The retainers all started shouting together.

The 'wind' now started gathering in one direction only, the 'waves' and their swells were pulsing with intense energy.

More creases appeared as Emperor Guhl Mephius brought his brows together.

And as he did so, he pulled the trigger.

"Hiiii!"

Screams surged all around. Orba forcibly peeled Ineli from off of him. As he raced up

the staircase, he heard the sound of the trigger being pulled again.

There had been no gunshot either time. Only the sound of the gun chamber revolving.

The third time was the same.

Realising this, Orba stopped halfway up the stairs and the voices of the retainers gradually faded. Guhl was about to pull the trigger one more time –

Or so it seemed, but he languidly let his hand drop. The gun, now near his waist, shook.

"I see," muttered the emperor of Mephius. He snorted suddenly, his white moustache swaying, then he bent backwards and burst into loud laughter.

As though they were held spellbound, or as if they had just woken up after that mayhem, not Orba, not Ineli – who had been thrown to the ground, Melissa, or the retainers could move.

Having laughed his full, Guhl sat back down on the throne with a thump.

"It was splendid, the way you were ready to stake your own life," those unexpected words reached Orba's ears.

What was Guhl – the man who had governed the country for so long – thinking in that moment? At that time, Orba did not know. He had no way of knowing.

However, his forehead free of perspiration, his breathing even, his voice so calm that his and Orba's ferocious clashing of words seemed like a lie, Guhl said, "Very well." He then continued –

"You are clearly my child and Mephius' crown prince, Gil. You, and also Ineli and the retainers, have given proof of that… Let's say that I accept your request. You can organise troops immediately and head to Ende in reinforcement. I will also allow Rogue, Odyne, Folker, Yuriah and their forces to pass through Solon."

So declared the emperor.

Chapter 5
The Outcome of Fate

Part 1

His Imperial Majesty has recognised His Highness Crown Prince Gil.

The news had already spread from the palace and all around the city below it, the people were raising cheers. As the story spread, embellishments were added to the details of the exchange between the emperor and crown prince.

“His Imperial Highness Gil truly is a hero. ‘I cannot live with the grief of Your Majesty not recognising me, so kill me now’, he said and he held out his own neck.”

“When His Majesty saw how His Highness Gil was willing to offer his own life as proof of his integrity, he acknowledged that this, more than anything, proved that he was of the imperial family. His Majesty must have been testing His Highness. His exalted thoughts truly are different from those of us common people.”

“Right, and after this, it’ll be the Garberan princess.”

“When will she be coming back? Once she returns, the next thing in store will be His Highness’ wedding ceremony.”

All at once, Solon was wrapped in a jubilant mood.

They no longer needed to fear that Mephians would fight one another and that Solon would be caught in the crossfire. Moreover, since the emperor had acknowledged Prince Gil, the friendship with the west had safely been completed.

“Maybe we can be at peace for a while with no wars?”

“No, sooner or later, His Highness Gil will probably lead soldiers in reinforcement to Ende.”

“What. Hasn’t His Highness only just come from Nedain? He really is busy, huh.”

Even though there were reports of Allion having come from the east with a large force, it was also known that their target was Ende; and, except for the over-anxious and those who had a shrewd understanding of national affairs, as far as the people were concerned, this was, after all, someone else's problem.

As for Mephius itself, its internal troubles had, at long last, been completely swept away, so there were many who believed that this finally marked the start of an era of peace and prosperity.

"Greetings, Your Imperial Highness."

"Your Highness Gil."

As Gil Mephius walked through the palace, the nobles that he passed stopped and bowed towards him. While raising a hand lightly in reply, he was checking over several things with the soldiers that were following behind him.

"How about Rogue and the others? The messenger should have arrived already."

"They will arrive in Solon the day after tomorrow."

"What about the reply from the Haman Firm?"

"In terms of cruisers, they can prepare three ships. They have loaded five airships in each and appear to be getting them prepared for take-off."

"The messenger we sent to Ende hasn't returned yet?"

The nobles who watched them pass by whispered together.

My.

He is walking along as though everything were completely normal.

Although it had not been so long ago that the crown prince had fought against Mephius' army, sent from none other than Solon, Gil Mephius' attitude contained neither self-consciousness nor reserve. There were a few people who showed dissatisfaction and anger at that, but most admired him for it. *Just as you'd expect from someone who held their ground before His Majesty. He has nerves of steel*.

The one who was currently holding the leading role in about eighty percent of all rumours circulating through Solon, in other words, Gil Mephius – or rather, Orba – did in fact have reservations over several matters.

But anyhow, there was no time.

A fleet from Allion had reached the port of Zonga a little less than half a month ago. It would not be surprising if hostilities had already opened. Ende would, of course, have made meticulous preparations against this first wave, so they might be able to hold their ground; but if Allion was envisioning a protracted war in which they would send out a second and a third wave of reinforcements, then Orba felt that it was vital to crush the enemy right at the start.

It was for that very reason that it was important for Mephius and Garbera, two countries who would not originally have been thought likely to join forces, to rush over there.

Taúlia is like that.

Further to the west, the city-state of Taúlia had been a long-time enemy of Mephius'. One with which they also shared a historical connection. Which, taken another way, also proved that Mephius had long been unable to destroy Taúlia. In terms of military power, Mephius exceeded Taúlia more than five times over; yet, in spite of this, Emperor Guhl, with all his unquenchable lust for supremacy, had only twice attacked them. Conversely, Ax had invaded Mephian territory three times.

The reason for that was because of the numerous small powers descended from Zer Tauran that were scattered around at Taúlia's back. Usually, they would engage in repeated skirmishes with their neighbouring states, but if even a single soldier from an outside power penetrated the west, they would demonstrate terrifying solidarity as they set about exterminating the invaders.

Standing shoulder-to-shoulder with the very enemy whose blood was still dripping from the tips of their swords, they would fight together against the 'enemies of Tauran'. For this reason, the countries at Tauran's periphery could not lightly interfere with that region.

Right now, that would be an ideal situation for Mephius, Garbera and Ende.

We need to make it clear to Allion that we will not be easy opponents.

And so, regardless of whether they won the first round of hostilities or whether their front lines were forced back, the two flags of the countries of Mephius and Garbera had to be flying together on the battlefield.

Furthermore, if the three countries cooperated, the reaction from the north – from Zonga and the coastal countries – might change.

Zonga was currently willing to cooperate with Allion, but if, from now on, the three adjoining countries were united, it might find it wiser to join them against Allion.

Therefore, ever since the day of his meeting with the emperor, Orba had been working practically without rest. Even his sense of how many days had gone by was blurry.

Whenever he got hold of even the slightest new information about Ende, he would add it to the maps in the council room. Thanks to the Haman Firm, he had also gotten in touch with the merchant guild in Solon and had summoned the traders who had some experience with Ende, incorporating their detailed reports into the maps.

It would be the first time Orba went to Ende. There was no such thing as investigating the terrain, climate or environment too thoroughly.

Meanwhile, they received news that reinforcements had left from Garbera. Prince Zenon was leading them and they consisted of a thousand two hundred from the Knights of the Order of the Tiger, three hundred from the Order of the Badger and a group of a hundred warriors from the west.

Did Prince Zenon go along with our side's intentions? When he heard about it, a smile flitted across Orba's faintly exhausted-looking face.

Naturally, calling for reinforcements from the west and having them go to Garbera by way of Apta was one of Orba's instructions. Zenon had for a while been kept away from the Order of the Tiger, but, again naturally, Orba had not sent reinforcements because he had been expecting that to be the case.

Since he suspected that opinions inside Garbera were still divided as to whether to send reinforcements to Ende, he had thought that they might start blowing in a better direction if their side was to send military aid.

And also, if I'm killed in Solon…

Indeed, even if his real identity were uncovered and his corpse exposed as that of a miserable slave, the west, which was supposedly Mephius' long-time enemy, would have moved its troops "at Crown Prince Gil's request." This would leave them with a double justification for the war with Allion: their friendship with Gil and the defence of an allied country that was under attack from a foreign enemy. On top of those two incontrovertible facts, they could then explain that "the slave executed in Solon was a fake sent by the crown prince," which would hopefully lead public opinion within Mephius to turn against the idea of further attacks against the west.

If the emperor then forcibly invoked the power of the state in order to move the army, he would be at odds with popular sentiment and sooner or later, some public-spirited person would – with a little greed and self-interest mixed in – surely choose to oppose the emperor.

Such had been Orba's thoughts.

Although they had all been based on the hypothesis of his own 'death', Orba had, of course, had no actual intention of dying. However, the need to prevent war with the west was an unshakable conviction of his that would not waver even in the face of the currently more pressing goals.

This was partly because it had been one of the targets he had given himself when he chose to stand once more as the Crown Prince; and if he ignored it, he felt as though he would lose the purpose he had accepted when rising to take the imperial throne.

I definitely have to see that through.

He could still hear the clicking sound of a gun's rotating cylinder – the moment when Emperor Guhl was about to pull the trigger.

At that moment, Guhl's burning gaze and undoubtedly been filled with murderous intent. The emperor would have pulled the trigger with the intention of killing the impostor Gil. And yet, the shot was not fired. Was it possible that a man like Guhl could have pulled the trigger, forgetting that the bullet chamber was empty?

He was probably testing luck – thought Orba.

His prediction from before deciding to head to Solon had proven to be correct.

Guhl had been driven into a corner. And far more so than Orba had expected.

The generals who should have dedicated their swords and their lives to the emperor had surrendered to the crown prince one after another; and in Apta, Birac and Nedain, the people who should have loved and worshipped Guhl alone were welcoming the crown prince's reign.

Because of that, Guhl had chosen a direct confrontation. He had believed that in front of his trusted retainers, he needed to completely tear through the impostor's disguise.

And then, realising that he had lost the confrontation, he had become aware that the luck he had intended to test when loading that bullet had slipped far away from him.

In that instant, Orba had received an impression of the emperor that was even stronger than when the latter had been blazing with the desire to kill him.

He was a lonely old man.

Even though he had believed until then that he still had the immense influence and leadership to pull along his adherents, he was made to realise that his surroundings were inevitably concerned about his own age, and, he had sat on his throne with eyes as tired as those of a craftsman on the verge of retirement.

So that's the emperor?

So that's what left of the statesman he once was?

When those words crossed Orba's mind, he himself could not tell whether the emotions that accompanied them were pity, contempt, or sorrow.

But what he did know was that he did not feel the slightest joy at having finally won against that man.

Before he knew it, Orba had made his way to Solon's dragon pen. It was a habit with him that he could not help but go and check on all the various preparations before a battle.

As he approached the pen, he could hear a woman's voice – something which did not fit the surroundings. Hou Ran. Even though she had arrived from Birac by air carrier just the other day, she had apparently spent her entire time since then looking after

the dragons.

This dragon pen was very close to the barracks he had used in the past for his Imperial Guards, as well as being adjacent to the landing grounds for airships. Seeing the dragons, fangs gleaming, feet stamping, on the other side of the cages while Hou Ran ran around looking after them, he had a strong sense that he really had returned to Solon.

And also, he caught sight of a medium-sized dragon, a Baian, who was eagerly pressing its snout against the bars of the cage.

“It’s you, is it?” Orba said laughingly as he stroked its snout.

The dragons that Ran usually took care of had, of course, been on the same air carrier as she had. Drool trailing from it, the Baian opened its mouth wide.

“Oh?” Hou Ran approached, chuckling.

“What?”

“No, nothing. Orba, have you learned to tell the dragons apart?”

Orba only realised it once she had said it. The dragon he had just spoken to had some kind of connection to him. And during the battle at Tolinea, they had lead the charge together.

Ran then made a strange request.

“Can you give this child a name?”

“A name?” Orba raised his eyebrows. “I’m sure you’ve told me before that names are meaningless to dragons.”

“And didn’t I also tell you that I could teach them the concept?”

She smiled more broadly than usual – although to those who did not know her, it would only seem like a very slight smile – and joined Orba in stroking the Baian’s forehead.

“This child understands Orba’s name, and more than that, it wants Orba to be able to

tell it apart from the other dragons."

There were differences between dragons and it looked as though each of them also had different ways of thinking. Orba was somewhat amused by this turn of events. After mentally going through a list of possible names, he decided on one.

"Milbak."

It felt as though, while groping through his memory, something had come tumbling out from a corner he did not usually touch and had gotten stuck to his fingertips. It was probably the name of a person or a place that he had read about long ago in some famous person's biography or in a book of military history.

"Not bad. Now all that's left is to see if this child likes it." Ran practically flew into the cage and brought her face close to the Baian's snout.

While Orba was continuing to supervise the preparations, the generals Rogue, Odyne, Folker and Yuriah each led their men into Solon.

"When we received Your Highness' summons from Solon, I honestly could not believe it." As soon as they alighted in the port, Rogue and the others went to see the prince. "And we were even given what was for all the world like a heroes' welcome from the townspeople."

"General Rogue kept warning us 'Don't let your guard down. We could be attacked from behind'," noted Folker.

"I have heard all sorts of rumours and tales," Odyne was unable to hide his expression of awed wonder. "But they are all so hard to believe so suddenly. Would you please tell us in detail about your talk with His Majesty?"

"Sure," Orba shrugged. He glanced towards the door of the room's antechamber. "But don't you all have people whose faces you'd like to see before mine?"

For a moment, the generals looked at each other in confusion. Orba snapped his fingers and the door opened.

"Ah!" Yuriah was the first to exclaim, while Rogue, the long-serving general, caught his breath. Odyne's eyes went wide before he turned to look at Orba.

Don't mind me – he seemed to be giving his approval.

The generals were still slightly hesitant, but in the end, the first to succumb to his feelings was, unsurprisingly, the comparatively young Yuriah Mattah. He rushed over to his parents and his young wife. As though that had given them permission, Odyne's wife and daughters drew closer, while Rogue and his wife and child closed the distance between one another, one step at a time.

They embraced each other, calling each other's names.

Lannie Lorgo, Odyne's usually valiant daughter, buried her face in her father's cloak, sobbing. Rogue's previously somewhat unreliable son, Romus Saian, also had his eyes shimmering with tears, but was holding himself back from making a sound.

"I've caused you a whole lot of trouble." Even when Rogue addressed him, he simply shook his head. Rogue smiled with tears in the corners of his own eyes. "I've heard all about it. About how you kept encouraging your mother and everyone this whole time. Even when the soldiers were dragging you away, or when you were in the prison… You really have inherited your father's blood – you're a splendid young warrior of the Saian House."

He laid his hand on his son's head. Romus was only a twelve-year-old boy and he could not keep holding back his tears. In the end, he too clung to his father and wept.

The commander of the Black Steel Sword Division, Folker Baran, watched on by himself, smiling. Orba drew up to him.

"That was unexpected."

"What was, Your Highness?"

"When I ordered the men to invite your family here as well, Folker, they gave me a really strange look. I can't believe you've been divorced three times."

"My sins are heavy."

"So I thought that maybe at least just your children… but the soldiers went white at the idea of having all of them together in one place."

"I had three with my first wife, five with my second one and two with my last wife. For

some reason, they all get along absolutely terribly."

"Go visit them later."

"I am very sorry to have worried you with this. However, my first wife told me never to go near her or her sons again, my second wife practically faints whenever I get close, and as for my third…"

I don't need to know – Orba swallowed those words that had risen to his lips and patted Folker on the shoulder. The Folker he knew had a gentle personality and was always calm and collected, so it was not that he was not curious about what kind of husband and father he was to his family, but right now, it didn't matter.

While organising troops, he decided in the end to station Folker Baran in Nedain. This was in preparation of any emergency. With the 'emergency' in this case having to do with Solon.

Given that the emperor had told Orba to show him his back, he must have gotten hold of the information that Orba bore a brand there. The rest of the world believed that the enmity between the emperor and crown prince had been entirely erased, but as far as Orba was concerned, nothing was over, and he had a hunch that, on the contrary, things were only just about to begin.

He decided to return Rogue Saian's division to Birac. This time, Yuriah's Bow of Gathering Clouds Division would be in charge of the troops' transport by air and of aerial combat. Four hundred Imperial Guards led by Orba in person, two hundred dragoons and cavalrymen, as well as four hundred of Odyne's riflemen would ride in three of Yuriah's cruisers.

General Odyne himself would be on stand-by in Solon with five hundred reservists. He would continue to make preparations for battle, so that if he received the notification, he would be able to rush over with the ships that they had borrowed from the Haman Firm.

When Folker and Rogue left Solon, Orba clasped their hands.

"I'm counting on you."

He valued Folker Baran highly as a 'man I can trust to have my back.' On the battlefield, he could leave his back to Pashir and Gilliam, but Folker was invaluable because – *as*

long as he's behind me, Orba knew that he could fight without having to worry about threats from the rear, beyond where his eyes could see.

Folker himself was no fighter, but his forte lay in his tenacity even when faced with possible defeat. In Mephius, there was no lack of brave commanders who held to the creed that one should attack the enemy with the ferocity of a raging fire, so Folker could only leave a rather unremarkable impression and tended not to be noticed. Nevertheless, after having confronted him at Tolinea, Orba's evaluation of him was that, had he been given a chance to show what he could do, he might well have become the emperor's right-hand man by now.

Perhaps because Folker could tell how highly he appreciated him, he vigorously clasped Orba's hand in return.

"Leave it to me. As for you, Your Highness, please be careful. It is apparently not rare for Allion to incorporate the likes of sorcerers within the troops that they mobilise. Please be wary of being misled by their dubious tricks."

"I understand."

Naturally, he did not say that – *I got put through the wringer by it in the west*. Even if he were told to be careful about sorcerers, it was a fact that there was nothing that could be done about them. However, he had learned by experience in the west that sorcery was not as all-powerful as read of in the legends. The man who had claimed to be Garda had apparently needed to put all sorts of preparations in place. If they were attacking Allion, it would be a different matter, but Orba guessed that the sorcerers would not be able to set up large-scale preparations in the territory of the enemy country that was Ende.

The day after Rogue and Folker had left, they finally received a reply from Ende. The letter brought by the messenger however had not been written by Prince Eric's own hand. Nor were the contents clear. It merely contained the non-committal information that discussions were still underway in Safia, and it was impossible to tell from it whether or not they were ready to accept reinforcements.

Have they already started to march? Orba wondered. The answer might have been delayed because they were in a situation in which it was difficult to contact Eric.

It was not even worth considering that it might be because Garbera had already dispatched reinforcements while Mephius had been slow to react.

Therefore, Orba decided that, for now, he would leave from Solon with his troops. They would head east to Idolo so that they would be able to move swiftly as soon as there was an official request from Ende.

Normally, in a case like this, when he had only just settled his quarrel with the emperor, Orba would have felt that having a splendid send-off ceremony was necessary, in part so as to lay the groundwork for the future. At present though, time was precious. They would fly directly to Idoro by air carrier, deliberately avoiding the hassle of leaving by horseback through the gates of the capital city. Although it was sudden, everybody briskly sprang into action.

Once Orba had given the command, the soldiers swiftly gathered their equipment, harnessed their horses or their dragons, re-checked the weapons which had already been loaded into the ships and, as soon as a messenger was sent to Idolo, they completed the preparations for take-off.

Orba himself was getting changed in his chambers within the palace and strapping a sword to his waist. The sun was setting in the west and the inside of the room was dyed red.

For a moment, his eyes rested on the mask that was lying on top of the desk. It too had gone red in the light of the setting sun and almost shone brightly enough to burn his eyes.

He started to stretch out a hand towards it.

But then pulled it back halfway.

“Dinn,” he called out the name of his page.

“Aye,” the boy who was inspecting his armour lifted his head. He was twelve or thirteen years old, and was certainly not shy. Although knowing full well that Orba was a former sword slave, he always served him as the ‘crown prince’. Orba looked straight into that familiar face.

“I’m leaving this place to you while I’m gone.”

“I understand,” the boy answered with a nod. “I will keep the room clean, the windows open to let in air, and change the flowers every day so that everything will be ready for when you return, Your Highness.”

Orba nodded in return.

“I know that you’re always taking care of that. I’m grateful,” he said.

Dinn opened his eyes wide for a second. “Your Highness,” he said, in a tone that for some reason was filled with reproach.

“W-What?”

“Do not speak so thoughtlessly. A gentleman of high standing does not usually tell a servant that he is ‘grateful’ for his busying himself with various trifles. If you speak up in that way, it will simply give rise to suspicion that something might be up,” said Dinn.

Thinking about it, he was the one who had first taught Orba the manners of the nobility. From how to stand to how to walk, talk, and even how to smile. Dinn had been no less of a demon of an instructor than Gowen, the overseer of gladiators, had been.

“Good. At times like these, all you should say is ‘same as usual’.”

“Fine, I get it… Well then, same as usual.”

The red light was also reflected in Dinn’s eyes as he saw Orba off, but Orba did not say anything in particular. The ‘same as usual’, he had him help him into his armour then left the room.

His subordinates and his soldiers were already fully assembled at the port. Among them were Pashir, Gilliam, Kain, Miguel and all the other former gladiators.

“We’re leaving.” With Gil Mephius’ expression, Orba gave his orders. “Don’t have any regrets for your homeland. That will only dull your strength when you grasp your sword. Discard all but twenty percent of them. Then take strength from thinking that you will live and return.”

“Aye, aye.”

Commanders and soldiers alike bowed their heads, and struck the ground with the handle of their spears, raising their guns high to the crimson skies.

Gil Mephius’ troops were able to take to the skies before the sun had finished setting.

Part 2

"Your Majesty."

Someone spoke.

Guhl Mephius had been sitting on his bed for quite a while now. He had not even finished changing.

He had cancelled that morning's court. Since Guhl would usually even invite to breakfast those who wished for an audience, this lead concern that he might not be feeling well, and a number of people came to visit him, but Guhl had the chamberlains send most of them away.

Only Empress Melissa had been allowed into his room, but Guhl could not remember what they had talked about. At the end, for some reason or another, she seemed to have given a shrill shriek.

How much time had passed since then?

"Your Majesty."

The voice called again.

Was there still someone here? He wearily looked up.

"Oh," the old emperor moaned. "I see. You're *still here*."

"It's a lovely day, Guhl."

Looking as though it was completely normal for them to be in the emperor's private chambers without his permission, that person went towards the room's closed curtains.

"Why are you shutting yourself away in the dark like this? You would do better to draw open the curtains and look at the gardens. The sky is blue and the wind is fresh and clear. The people of Solon are enjoying a peaceful morning again after so long. Young men and women are strolling along the avenues as the elderly are sitting and chatting while watching them go by."

"…"

"You should go and see them, listen to their voices. That is what the world is, Guhl. For the likes of us, the world is only what we can see. Especially for old men who have reached an age where all that's left is to leave things to the younger generation."

"I'm going senile," Guhl let out another moan. "If I were an ordinary person, then that would be that. I could just grow old and senile, then die. But I am the emperor. I carry the weight of the country on my shoulders. My world is not mine alone."

"You are a pitiful old man." Far from impressed, the other gave his opinion of Guhl. "And you should accept that age has caught up with you. I will reach a hand to what no hand can reach, and I will force you to see that which you cannot see. But you know, Guhl… Borrowing a power which humans should not touch in order to accomplish your goals… naturally, it makes you a failure as a human."

A glare was thrown towards the emperor.

"You were undeniably strong. When your mother was killed before your eyes by a dragon, you were convinced that it was your father's fault, and so you decided to become a ruler stronger than any other. You were going to create a country of peace, while seeing everything that happened within it, listening to every voice, and instantly crushing every sign of danger."

"…"

"And we supported you with all our might. Especially Lady Lana, your empress, who empathised with your way of doing things, unfettered by old ways and traditions. When trouble seemed to be brewing among the retainers' factions, she was always the first to play the part of mediator. Sometimes acting as your shield, sometimes as the arrow that admonished you, she gave you more help than any of we retainers. But…"

"Enough."

"But Lady Lana passed away too soon, much too soon. Immediately after bearing the long-awaited child, as though that had drained all the life from her. Ultimately, you and Empress Lana were husband and wife for almost no time at all."

"Enough."

On top of the bed, Guhl was grinding his teeth. But the voice did not stop.

“You were afraid. You, who was supposed to be strong, were afraid of how weak you were becoming when faced with the death of a loved one. It was the same as when your mother died. You had to find a reason for your grief. You had to make it someone’s fault. Before, you had been able to blame your father. But this time, it was different. It was nobody’s fault. And so, you could only invent blame. It was Lana’s fault. It was the fault of her own inherent weakness.”

Far from gradually swelling with the strength and fury of a storm, the voice continued its recital with the constant rhythm of the pitter-patter of a gentle rain.

“You loathe weakness. As a result of craving strength, you could not forgive any form of weakness. Neither in yourself, nor in others. And so, you came to hate Empress Lana, who had died before you, as though abandoning you; and neither could you forgive her son, Gil, who was gradually becoming more and more like her. Because of that, when it came to him, you…”

“That's enough!”

Emperor Guhl Mephius finally screamed out loud, then turned to bury his head in the bed.

The window was shut tight, and the heavy curtains were not swaying in any breeze.

“Your Majesty” – A different voice called out from outside the door.

Guhl lifted his head. There was no in the room except Mephius’ emperor. Guhl however was not particularly surprised. He knew it perfectly well, whose voice had been speaking up until then.

A hesitant murmur called out to him again. The soldier who was acting as the emperor’s guard informed him that he had another visitor. Guhl raised his eyebrows. “Didn’t I say that no one was to be allowed in?” – he was about to bellow in a thunderous voice, but suddenly, his shoulders fell wearily and he allowed the guest to enter.

“What is the meaning of your behaviour?” The one who appeared was a messenger from the Dragon Gods’ faith; the same old man as the one who had visited this exact room just before the confrontation with the crown prince. “You should have revealed

the impostor's real identity and had him immediately executed, just as we had agreed. Your grief would have been extinguished and things could have proceeded according to plan."

"My grief would have been extinguished?" Guhl responded vacantly before sneering. "I've thought before that you were inhuman monsters, but that feeling had never been as strong as it is now. You don't understand anything. Which isn't surprising, given that you look at people like pawns on a board. Did you seriously think that everything would go back to the way it was before if I forced through the impostor's execution then? Hah, before meddling with human fates, you should have learned more about the human world."

"…"

"Get out. Retire to your shadows and go and plot some evil scheme or another. I'm a little tired. If you want an in-depth discussion, come back some other time. Keep yourselves busy and go play in an empty lot."

The messenger from the Dragon Gods' faith left without any parting words.

Only a little while later, that same old man was prostrating himself before a bed in a place that was, indeed, wrapped in shadows.

There laid an old man. Of the elders of the Dragon Gods' faith, he was the leader and so all the more of an 'elder'. Even though, among that collection of elderly men, he was comparatively young. was the leader and so all the more of an 'elder'. Nevertheless, in these past few days, in which he had appeared neither before the emperor not anyone else, he seemed to have aged ten, twenty years.

"Damn you, Guhl, that…"

The muttering voice held no vigour and was occasionally racked by violent coughing.

"Did you get cold feet? Pathetic, he's just like all the other humans in this world. No matter how much ambition they have in their youth, as they grow older, the limits of what they can see – familiar scenery, family – becomes their own little kingdom with which they are content. And in their final moments, they look back on an existence in

which they have not accomplished a tenth of the ambitions of their youth and die thinking that theirs was a surprisingly good life."

His surroundings were silent and still.

There was only the single, kneeling elder carefully listening to him. The ceiling of the temple was high, and the shadows so thick that you could not see through them, no matter how you strained your eyes.

"You think that there is just one more step, but that step is unexpectedly far." The elder whispered, his eyes darker than the shadows. "If you think about it, both Magic King Zodias and Garda, the high priest of Zer Tauran in the west, were like that. Both of them laid their plans, both of them approached their goals one step at a time, yet neither were able to accomplish them. However… they moved forward every time. What, at that time, felt like the final step had to be repeated over and over again until, now, it seems more like a hundred steps."

Coughing and breathing raggedly, as though he held a storm in his throat, the elder continued to expound even though there was no one to hear.

"Zodias discovered how to extract ether from humans, Garda rallied the nomads, they who preached the revival of the Dragon Gods, and took back the 'Dragon God's Claws'. While analysing the laws of sorcery and creating new ones, he distributed 'passageways' throughout the world and constructed ether supply routes. The cost in time and lives was absurdly high. From being born as a baby to being resigned to greet death in old age… how often was that amount of time repeated? Even though it was finally about to take shape here in Mephius…"

How did it all start?

The elder's voice continued to speak of lonely recollections, occasionally fading so low that no one could possibly hear it.

"Ah yes, it's been ever since the failed assassination attempt against the crown prince and the princess, in Seirin Valley. That should have brought Guhl to sever all lingering ties of affection with this mortal world, Garbera and Ende should have been dragged into the fray, and the power balance at the centre of the continent should have been overturned."

There was also that time, in the west. By setting up that man called Reizus as the new

Garda and using the artefacts that were the shrines that I myself had left behind, we should have been able to open a 'passageway' to Mephius while watching how Barbaroi responded.

"But he was defeated much faster than expected. Not, however, to the point that we needed to reassess the diagram of fate. *That* too was brought about because the gears of fate were temporarily thrown out of order. Back then, we left things as they were since we had to concentrate on making the next preparations towards our pre-determined goal. But upon carefully examining what happened, what seems to have emerged is the dazzling radiance of the fate of the one responsible for the malfunctioning gears."

The dark-skinned elder was once again racked by a violent coughing fit. For a while, his emaciated limbs convulsed and his breaths seemed to be wrung from him, as though the life was draining from his entire body.

"We cannot wait any longer. For now, I am willing to abandon half of the diagram of fate, but we must get rid of that element of disturbance. Zafar. Is Zafar here?!"

"I am here."

His answer was heard.

Yet he was not there.

No, it was rather that the one who spoke was the old man kneeling before the bed. However, he was not the man who had called himself "Zafar" in the west. Nevertheless, even while his body quivered and his starting eyes twitched, he spoke in Zafar's voice.

"This time, be sure to end the Crown Prince's life. The place will be the battlefield. There will be nothing strange about something happening there so the compensation for using sorcery to interfere with the diagram of fate will be somewhat reduced. I will let Tahī accompany you, so be sure to accomplish your mission at all cost."

"Aye." Although Zafar answered thus, after a moment, he asked, "What should we do about that Barbaroi matter?" That was all that was said, yet even so, the voice was hoarse and the flesh at his neck shook uncontrollably. "I am lead to suppose that he is under Barbaroi's protection."

"At this point, it won't do to be overly concerned with Barbaroi, or to let them

meddle...” For a while, the elder seemed unable to marshal his thoughts, but finally –

“I will allow twelve deaths.” His words were strange and repulsive. “That much is still within the range of what can be repaired. Good, use the power brought about by those deaths to kill Gil without fail. I am repeating myself, but we cannot wait any longer. I’m sure you’re clear on what your fate will be if you fail.”

“Aye, aye.”

Immediately after Zafar’s voice answered, the elderly man who had been kneeling collapsed forward with a thud. As he painfully started to rise, blood dripped from his nose, mouth and eyes.

“After which, it will be Guhl.” The elder, who was no longer looking towards him, curved his dry and cracked lips. “I intended to guide him with the utmost care and caution, but there too the gear has malfunctioned. Is he no longer of any use? Then in that case…”

The elder lifted a trembling hand from on top of the bed. He stared intently at that bony, almost fleshless hand, that was as dry as old wood.

“I was wanting my next body anyway. Since it’s like that, once I become Guhl, I will have to plan the reconstruction of the diagram of fate, even if it means using slightly forceful methods. Barbaroi might also launch an attack but… It’s fine. When that happens, I’ll burn down Solon, or no, all the people of Mephius, and gather the power needed to push them back for now.”

Part 3

Flora Mephius had turned eleven years old during that year's Founding Festival.

She was Empress Melissa's daughter and Princess Ineli's younger sister, but even without comparing her to her eye-catchingly gorgeous mother and sister, she was shy by nature and so her full-scale social debut had been delayed. Even so, when the emperor made a public appearance, she could more and more often be seen amongst those accompanying him, and the general feeling had been that she would probably gradually start taking a leading role in balls and tea parties. This too was delayed, however, because of the trouble and turmoil centred around Solon.

And now again.

The figures of the adults that she had met and exchanged words with at court were growing as blurry as a black wind, and were melting away on all sides, leaving Flora all alone.

The court at Solon was in confusion.

Directly after the crown prince returned and had his audience with the emperor, the feeling had been that the civil war which had divided the country would not be dragged out any further; yet now that same crown prince was about to leave, leading soldiers to go in reinforcement to Ende, everyone seemed to have been seized with anxiety. Instead of staying in the imperial capital, horses and air carriers started being launched to every part of Mephius.

Some headed to Nedain, where Folker Baran was stationed, saying that "Guarding the fortress will be vital. When something needs to be done, I can always be counted on," and, although they had not been asked to do so, they carried money there, explaining that "This is for the immediate war fund."

Others went to Birac and requested a personal meeting with its lord, Fedom Aulin. "Ever since the day I received your letter, I have been carrying it preciously at my breast. I share the same concern for the country as you. Actually, during the audience, I also raised my voice in support of His Highness the crown prince…" they said, all the while assuming the appearance of long-time, like-minded comrades.

Speaking of Birac, Rogue Saian found himself in a similar situation, as did Odyne, who

was waiting on standby in Solon with the reservists. Suddenly, nobles, men of wealth, and powerful merchants that they had never even spoken to before were lining up and approaching them, all with the air of being old friends.

All of these actions were, of course, because of 'Crown Prince Gil Mephius', whose presence had grown so large. Almost as though in inverse proportion to this, and partly because he had not shown himself in public these past few days, Emperor Guhl Mephius' existence seemed little by little be wearing thin. To the point that now –

"The way His Majesty acted back then was truly without compassion."

"Then what about that other time? There was no way that he was ever going to admit his own mistake."

– There were those who were dredging things up from the past and were openly criticising him. Nonetheless, even those people knew the emperor's influence had not yet been erased; and when then saw Colyne Isphan, considered to be of the emperor's faction, coming from the opposite end of a hallway, or when Empress Melissa, her ladies' maids in tow, appeared, their faces would go pale and they would send them a tentative bow.

In short, it was a fight between factions.

Gil and Guhl – although there was no longer the risk of a war in which both would lead soldiers and confront each other directly from behind cannons, strategies were now starting to unfold through words and actions, set on the stage of the wide halls of the palace, the locked rooms within aristocratic mansions, and the exclusive side-alley brothels hidden from public view. This was a clash between both camps, or perhaps it would be better to say, between the respective followers of the emperor and of the crown prince.

Their minds were constantly whirling.

How much longer is His Majesty's reign likely to last?

Is His Highness Gil really able to take the throne? And if he does take it, when will that be?

No, there might be another dispute between the two of them because of that very reason.

Or in other words –

At this point, which camp is it in my best interests to get close to?

And so, even as they exchanged greetings with calm expressions, they would narrowly observe and try to read the other's intentions, all while surveying their surroundings, their nerves on edge, as they tried to obtain even the smallest piece of additional information.

In that sense, it was a lot like the silent struggle that had recently enveloped Ende. There too, opinions had been divided as to which of the two princes, Jeremie or Eric, would succeed to the throne, and so the nobles and military commanders had engaged in scheming every bit as dangerous as a sword fight. Ultimately, no matter which country or power it was, similar circumstances would always give rise to a similar situation.

Flora Mephius was a girl who looked even younger than her age. However, she was by no means stupid. She could sense the dangerous atmosphere that was flowing through the palace, and her sensitive heart shuddered in fear.

The strife between the men was not the only reason for that. These past few days, another name had gained the same presence as that of Crown Prince Gil Mephius – or no, within Solon's court, it was perhaps even greater.

Flora's older sister – Ineli Mephius.

At present, she had taken control of a section of the court. Even before the face-to-face meeting between the emperor and the crown prince, Ineli had surreptitiously been increasing her association with influential aristocrats, and had seemed to be manoeuvring them into joining the prince's faction. Then, at the audience which was still being talked about in Solon, she had taken visible action. She had protected the crown prince to the end, even to the point of shielding him with her own body.

In doing so, she appeared as a brave and gallant figure who, with a fierce will and the infinite compassion of a holy Mother, had protected the country's future; so that even amongst the people, it had given rise to the feeling that she too was a hero.

Consequently, even those influential people who had already been part of the anti-Emperor faction for some time felt that, if they wanted to get closer to the crown prince, they could not afford to ignore Ineli's existence. All day long, she was

surrounded by crowds of people – be they those who wanted to meet the prince in person, those who came to offer gifts, or those who loudly claimed that they had always had a high opinion of the crown prince.

In a sense, Ineli was the living symbol of the crown prince's faction.

As already mentioned, a large number of people had gone to visit the lord of Birac, Fedom Aulin, but even this ambitious gentleman could not deny that something felt lacking. *Hmm, there seem to be fewer people coming to see me than I'd expected…* he puzzled over it, tilting his thick neck. That was probably because, for many of those who wished to approach the crown prince, Ineli had already come to be seen as the best point of contact with him.

However, even though Fedom, lord of Birac, should have been hurrying to Solon as soon as he could, he optimistically believed that: "By deliberately keeping a distance from Solon and being seen to be taking care of Birac in the crown prince's absence, my influence will actually grow."

According to his judgement, clearly letting others see the long line of people who had travelled from afar all the way to Birac to see him would only serve to increase his presence and prestige. However, although on the one hand he was not wrong, Fedom had overlooked Ineli.

Nor was he the only one.

The empress, Ineli's own mother, Melissa Mephius, must have been feeling as though she had been ambushed from a completely unforeseen direction.

Sensitive as she was, Flora Mephius could sense the way that sparks were flying fiercely between mother and daughter just below the surface.

One time, when Flora was unable to bear the cutting atmosphere of her surroundings, she went to visit her mother's chambers in the palace's Inner Quarters. Although she had notified her mother beforehand, the empress was already surrounded by a crowd of people talking to her, and Flora was driven into a corner of the room.

Properly speaking, it was a rule within the Inner Quarters that, no matter how low or how high their status was, no more than three men could be in a single room at the same time. Recently though, that rule had started to be ignored, and any number of men could be found together like this. Just from that, Flora felt as though she had lost

her place to be.

Colyne was among those present. These people were what was known as the Emperor's faction. Flora gazed in horror at those many figures crowding around her mother. Her mother – her beautiful, wise mother who was loved by all and whom the girlishly innocent Flora could not help but adore – seemed to have suddenly lost weight recently.

Perhaps because the skin of her face was stretched taut, her eyes seemed oddly bulging, the lines around her mouth stood out, and she did not look at all like a woman close to giving birth.

Flora held her pet cat, with its soft snow-white fur, close to her chest. It was a cat from the Schypa breed, which had been sent as a gift from a neighbouring country on the occasion of the Founding Festival. She had named it Nelwin, because it was mischievous and she often had to chase after it, as it tended to dash away whenever she took her eyes off of it. Perhaps because the Schypa, just like Flora, could sense that the atmosphere was different from usual, its eyes were darting around and it did not move from its mistress' arms.

It was then that a particularly high-pitched voice was heard coming from her mother.

"Ineli… what is that child doing!"

Flora raised her head in surprise.

The men seemed to be explaining something in whispers. Empress Melissa slammed her fist against the long table.

"That child is just using what displeases me to defy me. With this issue as well, she's planning on making fools out of the adults. A little girl who understands nothing. This, I would rather…"

"Empress," as she was about to say more, one of the retainers, having no doubt realised that Flora was there, lowered his voice and glanced towards the girl who was hugging her cat.

Melissa seemed to notice her daughter for the first time. When her eyes met Flora's, her expression turned even more terrifying.

“Haven’t I told you not to let that cat wander around in the Inner Palace!” She shrieked.

Flora gave a start then stood petrified. Nelwin gave a meow then leapt from her arms. After once or twice looking inquiringly at Flora, it rushed out from the room.

Even so, the girl still did not move. As though she had come back to her usual self, Melissa’s lips curved into a smile. Her gestures were exactly the same as those that Flora’s sister, Ineli, had been once before.

She walked towards her with that forced smile and stroked the dark brown hair that Flora had inherited from her father.

“I’m sorry for raising my voice. Even though I’m always teaching you how to behave as a lady.”

It’s alright – Flora could not say it. She could only watch, her eyes opened wide, as her mother’s smile came closer. She could no longer feel Nelwin’s warmth in her arms. Right then, Flora felt alone in the world.

“There is nothing to worry about, Flora. Listen to what Mother says and become a daughter after His Majesty’s own heart. As the older sister to the next emperor, who will soon be born, you have to hold your head up.”

Then, as if to say that she had finished all the business they had together, the empress gave her daughter’s shoulder a light push that seemed to be urging her to leave.

Flora quietly obeyed. There was nothing else she could do.

As she was leaving the room, a man crossed by her as he was entering.

“I, Zaas Sidious, have come at the empress invitation.”

The young warrior certainly spoke courteously, but when they passed by each other, she felt his energy emanating from his shoulders like heat. He entered the room without appearing to notice Flora’s presence.

All by herself, the princess left.

Zaas Sidious was the general who, along with Folker and Yuriah, had led the army tasked with suppressing the Impostor crown prince. Just before they had left, they had

been invited to a banquet hosted by the imperial family. After their defeat, while the other two had joined the crown prince's side, only Zaas had brought his men back to Solon.

The emperor neither punished nor thanked him. *Do not show your face before me* seemed to be the implicit order, and the young Zaas burned in rage and humiliation even as he remained in the capital.

"You have come at just the right time," Empress Melissa sent Zaas a smile – one that was rich with charm and completely different from the one she had just given her daughter.

Although there were many who scorned or ignored him, Melissa highly valued this young general who had refused to join the crown prince's side. While Zaas, for his part, had vowed to himself that he would rise to fight again, and the eyes he turned towards the empress were filled with an even fiercer light than they had been before his defeat in battle.

"There is something I want you to do," Melissa seemed to be offering him a temptation.

Chapter 6
Disintegration

Part 1

The Zongan port town Washmeel was famous for its large red-light district.

Before the sun had even finished setting, prostitutes from every corner of the world beckoned to the rough sailors who had equally come from all over. Gambling was also prominent, and even when the sun was still high in the sky, shouts of glee and screams of anguish alike rose from the streets leading to that neighbourhood, as the joys and sorrows of winning and losing unfolded.

The ships carrying Prince Kaseria Jamil of Allion and his two thousand soldiers had docked at the port more than two weeks ago.

Kaseria had granted the soldiers a moderate respite, and they were making the most of Washmeel's nightlife. Neither women nor gambling were forbidden to them. They spent money steadily and there was a general opinion that they needed to make the most of Zonga.

Kaseria himself hardly left the ship. He was known to be a womaniser, but he almost never slept with prostitutes.

My tool isn't made to be used with money – he openly declared with a roar of laughter.

Day after day, he stretched himself out on the ship's deck, or would be in his room, also lying down. His attitude was not at all that of a commander leading a large army to war.

One night, Lance Mazpotter was on his way to pay a call to the prince's private cabin. Just as he was about to set foot on the pier, a voice called out to him from the shadows to one side.

"Sir Lance."

It was the Endean prince, Jeremie Amon Doria. However, if someone who had known

him in the past, when he was praised in Safia for being the very epitome of an Endean aristocrat, were to see him now, they might well conclude that, although there was a certain resemblance, this must be a different person. That was how much Jeremie's appearance had changed.

Once upon a time, when he rose in the morning, he would take his time arranging his hair with the help of his underlings, but now, it was utterly dishevelled. He, who had once been recognised as a leader of fashion in Safia, did not have a single accessory adorning him; his clothes, which he had not changed in many days, were slightly grubby and were giving off an unpleasant smell. But more than anything, it was his eyes. Those slender, almond-shaped and ever detached eyes had been famed for brimming with a brilliance innate to those of noble birth, and had once captivated countless men and women, yet now, they were now dull and listless.

"Greetings, Prince. Ah, no, Your Excellency the future Grand Duke of Ende."

Lance gave a bow, but Jeremie looked as though he could not bear to waste time on greetings.

"Sir Lance, what's the situation? Militarily, I mean. How has Ende reacted? What kind of moves is Eric making?" He enquired breathlessly.

Lance lips were curved into a gentle smile.

"But these various matters should already have been communicated to you, Lord Jeremie."

"I-I know. However, that was already five days ago. I want to know what the situation is now. B-Besides, this stay in Zonga is dragging on. When will Allion's forces start moving? At this rate, aren't you just needlessly granting that damned Eric a reprieve?."

"As to that, there are many things that someone in a position as lowly as mine cannot understand. His Highness Kaseria keeps it all safely in his own mind. Ah, but speaking of which, there is a council of war scheduled for tomorrow evening. I am sure that you, Lord Jeremie, will also be called to attend."

Lance bowed once again then, after winking to the soldiers on the pier who were standing on guard on either side of the flagship, he made his way on board. Behind him, Jeremie was calling something out, but the soldiers blocked his way. His voice gradually faded in the distance.

Bah. Shrugging his shoulders which were lightly clad in armour, the veteran warrior from Atall pulled a face. *A pathetic wretch*.

Even though he had been the one to invite Allion to the centre of the continent, Jeremie had already been pushed to the side. Simply because he could not accept being passed over as the next successor, and instead wished to forcefully overturn this reality, he had appealed for Allion's assistance, failing to take into account the risk of his own country being annexed by such a powerful kingdom's military.

Although he could be said to be the man who had given it just cause for its invasion, Allion no longer had any use for him. Afterwards, he would, at best, be kept on as a figurehead. According to what he had heard, Jeremie, either because he was growing more impatient by the day or to repress his feelings of guilt, spent his entire time abusing black water lily powder.

That Eric, his younger brother, was effectively the ruler of Ende was a reality that he seemed unable to allow to continue for even a single moment longer, which was why he occasionally came to see Kaseria and Lance like this. It was unclear though how much longer his spirit would last.

Whether asleep or awake, he's just dreaming.

A smile once again crossed Lance Mazpotter's deeply chiselled face, then he suddenly stopped dead, and, exactly as though he was looking for assassins prowling in the shadows, his healthy right eye sharply darted left and right.

I haven't seen that sorcerer recently.

Jeremie had not fled alone from Ende: his attendant sorcerer Hezel had definitely travelled with him. At first, he could be seen following Jeremie like a shadow but, these past few days, the young sorcerer had suddenly vanished.

Not being from Allion, Lance Mazpotter felt that sorcerers were uncanny and loathsome beings.

The sort to hide lurking somewhere… Well, whatever. The plots of one lone sorcerous vermin won't change the course of fate at this point.

There were also several sorcerers accompanying the prince's troops. So if, for example, he was planning on causing harm by killing the prince and removing the

army's central figure, they would be able to stop him beforehand. Thinking that, Lance forgot about Hezel for now. Instead, he continued forward.

"You here?" He asked, and pushed open the door without waiting for an answer.

From inside the room came a woman's scream. Her suntanned back was visible above the bed. Next to her, and almost as though in contrast to her, was a young man with white skin who was smoking a narrow, silver-tipped pipe[2].

"That you, Lance? You're as uncouth as ever."

"Who knows when and where the enemy might strike. Say that I'd been an assassin, what would you have done, O Heir to the throne of Allion?"

"First, I would've used the woman as a shield, then, I would've turned the tables on you."



While the woman hurriedly getting dressed in the partial concealment offered by the bed seemed startled at his words, Kaseria raised the sword that had been left nearby. It was unsheathed.

Before long, the woman silently slunk off.

“If I’m not mistaken, that was…”

“Count Washmeel’s youngest daughter. He holds jurisdiction over this port.”

Ah, nodded Lance. Since she had a level-headed personality despite being young, he had thought upon first meeting her that – *she’s exactly the sort Kaseria likes*.

“It’ll be *something* if her father finds out. As if it wasn’t enough that Zonga is acting as though they’re being made to swallow a humiliation over this whole affair.”

“She’s not the sort to go telling tales. She’s a woman who can deal with the consequences of having offered up her own ass.”

“Oh? I thought I’d taught you most of what there is to know about women.” Lance closed his single eye for a second. “Unlike with swords and war, you can’t rely on previous experience. Never think that just because you’ve known another woman with a similar personality in the past that things are going to go the same way every time.”

“I’ll bear it in mind. More importantly,” Kaseria had been yawning but now his eyes suddenly shone brightly, “have you released the ‘dogs’?”

“Yeah. They’ve checked up to the forest. They should reach Dairan five days from now.”

Lance opened the cabin window as he was giving his answer. Kaseria was smoking black water lily powder, and Lance hated having the strangely slimy smoke coiling around him.

“Good, finally. Ende’s little lord should come flying as soon as we bait him. And then, we just need to crush them in one go.”

“That would be great, but…”

“What?” As soon as he heard that, Kaseria, still in bed, looked displeased. “Something’s

happened, hasn't it? Don't act all mysterious and just tell me."

"Yeah, there's some bad news. Garbera seems to be taking action."

"Garbera?"

According to information that Lance Mazpotter had recently received, it appeared that the Kingdom of Garbera, which lay south of Ende, was sending a troop of more than two thousand in reinforcement. Kaseria irritably raised his arms overhead.

"Weren't Garbera and Ende supposed to have only just crossed spears? That damned Jeremie was speaking nonsense."

When they had alighted at the Zongan port, they had naturally met with Jeremie, the one responsible for ushering them into the centre of the continent. According to what he had said –

"Mephius is in the middle of a civil war that has split the country in two, and it's also embroiled in a silent feud with Garbera over the treatment given to the princess who was sent there to get married. On top of that, Eric recently invaded Garberan territory. Since Ende has not concluded any alliances with foreign countries in a long time, it is now virtually isolated and helpless."

"Garbera is a country of knights… was that it? So it should prize righteousness. Just like you, its chivalrous spirit must have been stirred at the thought of defending the descendants of the Magic Dynasty," Lance suggested sarcastically.

Lance had, from the start, been unenthusiastic about this war and, above all, he had strongly objected when he heard about the plan to send a second troop overland. Spreading out between Allion and Ende was a mountainous area through part of which stretched the country of Ryalide. He had been opposed to coercively sending their forces through it.

"We shouldn't provoke Ryalide with that kind of manoeuvre."

"What can a small country like Ryalide do? You were there last year when I met its king, weren't you? That pig is just a coward who only thinks of his own safety," Kaseria laughed.

"Don't underestimate him. When the path of escape is cut off, even a coward will bare

his fangs. If Garbera joins in and it looks like we're having a hard time during the first battle, Ryalide might send its troops from behind."

"And that wouldn't matter. It's fine if the second wave of troops attracts plenty of enemy attention. That's why I had Sir Phard, my ever-lovable older half-brother, put in charge of them. Even without being told, that hothead is guaranteed to raise some eye-catching sparks."

Perhaps tired of lying down, Kaseria sprang to his feet, the sword still in his hand. He swung it horizontally, as though to decapitate an invisible enemy.

"Even I don't expect to overrun the whole of Ende with this war, you know. But, if we use the right bait, then in a week's time, we might be toasting the freshly severed head of the Lord-next-Grand-Duke-of-Ende in this very cabin," so saying, he roared with laughter.

Humph, Lance's expression seemed to be mocking a young novice's shallow cleverness, but as a matter of fact, the sword play that he was now demonstrating beneath his eyes surpassed that of any soldier from within the country or outside of it that Lance could compare him to.

To think that he would become this good a swordsman – Lance reflected anew.

After his home country had been destroyed by Allion, Lance was employed by its king at the royal palace. He was to become a tutor, or, more specifically, an instructor in swordsmanship, to Kaseria, who was then thirteen-years-old.

Lance had made clear his dissatisfaction. At thirteen, one should already have the physical basics. From what he had heard, however, Kaseria had been a premature baby and, when he was born, he had hovered between life and death. The King of Allion had sent east and west for countless skilled doctors so that his son might somehow live. It was said that he had even borrowed the help of sorcerers. That he had strived so hard towards prolonging his son's life was, of course, out of love for his own child but, more importantly, it was also because the death in infancy of a first-born child was considered an evil omen in Allion.

Perhaps because of that history, both of his parents had spoiled Kaseria rotten. If there was something that displeased him even a little, Kaseria would bawl and cry, or, half in jest, he would blame the retainers for something or another and would ask his father, the king, to have them executed.

I have to teach the sword to that brat?

Just because the instructor was a skilled swordsman, it did not mean that the student would learn to be any good. To make matters worse, the other party was a boy with an atrocious personality who had never even held a sword up until then.

However –

Now, nine years later, Kaseria was one of the best swordsmen in the kingdom. It was not out of sycophancy or deference to the heir to the throne that so many noted fencers had dropped to their knees after receiving one of his blows in the palace's training grounds. Despite his youth, his feats on the battlefield were among the most noteworthy; this too was not because he squeezed his strategists and his subordinates dry of their intelligence and strength while he advanced at a leisurely pace, grabbing all achievements for himself. No matter how difficult the battle, he was always in the vanguard, his entire body covered in his opponents' blood, pressing forward to slaughter more and more enemies.

It'll be the same thing this time – thought Lance, not expecting any unforeseen events as he admonished Kaseria in his usual way.

Even though Eric Le Doria had been waiting impatiently for this news, he could not help doubting his ears for a second.

Reinforcements of over a thousand were coming from Garbera. Moreover, it was said that Prince Zenon Owell would be leading them. It was not only Eric but a great many people in Ende who could not hide their surprise. They had felt the same when their young lord had requested aid from Garbera, but seeing it actually materialise was as unexpected for them as it was for Eric himself, even though he had been the one to actually suggest it.

Nevertheless, it was with an expression that seemed to say that this development was entirely natural, and with a somewhat proud backward glance at his astonished retainers, that Eric personally went to greet the Garberan troops in Safia and exchanged a firm handshake with their prince.

"It's been a long time, Prince Zenon."

“It has, Lord Eric. I am grateful to you for going out of your way to meet us. Still, I did not think that our reunion would come like this.”

“It brings back memories of that shadowy fort, doesn’t it?”

What Eric was alluding to was time when, right after battle had broken out near Zaim and, at Mephius’ suggestion, they had held a special three-way meeting in the fort within the Nouzen Mountains.

“If I remember right, it was raining, wasn’t it?”

“Yes. Even though it was broad daylight, it was so dark that you couldn’t see the expression on someone else’s face even if you went right up next to them. Back then, it was myself, you, Prince Zenon, and the crown prince of Mephius.”

“Ah, that other gentleman. It seems that he has revived after being dead for a while.”

“I thought at the time that he was eccentric, but I would never have imagined it was to that extent.”

The two of them laughed discreetly.

While doing so and continuing their talk, both was thinking of the other – *he’s changed*.

At the time, they had been mutual enemies who would not have let the other leave the battlefield alive, so saying that they had “changed” was a matter of course. However, to take the example of Eric, he, who was perhaps not by nature an eloquent speaker, had at the time merely muttered a few short words; yet now he projected his voice as well as an attitude of complete self-confidence. Zenon’s manner, meanwhile, had been as regal as it had been severe, with a look that seemed to say that only those who followed him without question were his allies, yet now, that harshness was removed and there was gentleness in his expression.

Whereupon –

“May we introduce ourselves?”

Moldorf’s large body came up to stand in line next to Zenon. Nilgif followed behind.

“We didn’t even stay three days in Garbera. Next stop by ship, and it’s the famous water

capital, Safia. How long are we going to be here for? Well since we're at it, don't you feel like comparing all these countries' liquor, Brother?"

"Why can't you think before opening your mouth? People will start doubting whether Kadyne's warriors have any manners," his brother thundered.

Lord Eric's eyes opened wide at the appearance and behaviour of the western warriors that he was seeing for the first time, and Zenon, who saw himself as he had been a few days earlier in that, let slip a chortle.

A small welcome party was held that evening. The next day, things turned into a council of war gathering the main army commanders.

In fact, however, Zenon and Eric had met late the previous evening, just the two of them. As the two overall commanders, there were intending to decide on their tactical course of action before the council, which was sure to become a tangled mess of patriotic zeal.

Taking only these two into account, their mutual hatred and enmity had already faded, but it could not be said that the same held true for the soldiers they were leading. As far as the Garberan soldiers were concerned, they could hold nothing but resentment towards Ende, which had come up with some false accusation and used it to invade their country. Meanwhile, the Endean soldiers held a deep-seated antipathy towards Garbera, which had one-sidedly discarded the secret alliance between the two countries.

"It's unfortunate, but I can't say for sure that having both our forces manoeuvre in the same area wouldn't be dangerous."

"I entirely agree with you," Zenon nodded. "It might be best to act separately."

The enemy was also broadly divided into two groups. There was Kaseria Jamil's force, which was in Zonga, to the north, and which had yet to make a move. That one numbered two thousand. While the troops approaching Dairan via the overland route in the north of Ryalide, by way of the mountainous region known as the "cunning dragon's spine", were three or four thousand strong.

The end result was that Lord Eric's three thousand Endean soldiers would be stationed in Dairan, while the two thousand troops from the combined forces of Prince Zenon and the west would take up position east of there and check the troops

approaching by the overland route.

“Once the enemy sees Garbera’s flag, even they will probably hesitate. If the two armies remain at a stand-off for long enough, we will hopefully be able to turn Allion back with the minimum amount of damage.”

With the course of action decided, the council of war generally proceeded along the lines that the two of them had agreed upon.

Part 2

There was no movement, however.

It would soon be a month since Kaseria Jamil had dropped anchor at Zonga's port.

Lord Eric had left Safia with a force of three thousand and had once more trod on Dairan's soil, but when they still failed to make any move, what he felt was not so much impatience as suspicion.

It was the same for the eastern overland force. Perhaps they had received fresh orders from their prince, since far from hurrying their steps, they were remaining lodged in a village within the buffer zone between Ryalide and Ende.

It was a strange situation. As far as the enemy was concerned, taking so much time only meant that their opponents would be able to make their preparations while they themselves whittled away their money and provisions.

Or maybe…

Eric considered the possibility that because of Garbera's sudden participation, the enemy might have gotten cold feet and temporarily halted their military operation, and were now hesitating over whether to advance or to retreat.

It'd be great if they could retreat at this point.

He pondered whether he should send a messenger to Kaseria in Zonga. Something along the lines of: this whole thing was a plot of Jeremie's alone and since it never had anything to do with Allion, let us for now return our swords to their sheathes.

That evening, Eric stopped by the Plutos mansion to consult with Kayness, who was like a second father to him. Kayness endorsed his plan, however –

"We cannot let down our guard. Kaseria is known to wage war with the ferocity of a raging fire, but in fact, he also excels at cunning. It's probably because his adjutant, Lance Mazpotter, takes part in planning his operations."

"Lance Mazpotter. I think I've heard that name…"

“The One-eyed Dragon of Atall. A great general who repelled three thousand of Allion’s troops with only a hundred of his own men.”

Kayness’ back was always ramrod straight and his words were few and plain, but each one of them had the weight of a blow that struck true. From back when Eric was a child, in his eyes, Kayness had always exemplified what it was to be a warrior – or rather, a man.

Belmor Plutos was also beside him. Being Kayness’ second son and close to Eric in age, the two were childhood friends who had worked hard together in their studies of academics and the military arts. He now stayed at Eric’s side in the position of a military officer under his direct command.

“However, from what I remember,” Belmor spoke up, “not so long ago, when we were working towards making a move on Garbera, there were overtures that came from Allion. And the sender was…”

“Yeah. Kaseria Jamil,” the lord of Ende nodded. When he had been fanning popular sentiment inside the country prior to invading Garbera, the one who had sent him a letter announcing we will lend you our help had been none other than Kaseria, the prince of Allion.

If he was not mistaken, it was around the same time that Allion had brought its eastern expedition to a close. Yet regardless of that, it – or rather, Kaseria Jamil – had already been on the hunt for the next scene of bloodshed. From that time onwards, Kaseria had probably been looking for an opportunity to move his armies from the east to the west, and towards the centre of the continent.

Although Eric did not go back on his decision to send a messenger, he abandoned the sweet hope that things could end with that.

And if it did… He did not think that Kaseria would pull back his troops so easily. It was possible that he might be staying so long in Zonga because he had asked his country for reinforcements and was currently waiting for them.

The more he learned about the man called Kaseria Jamil, the more certain he became.

He’s like a beast who has acquired a taste for flesh. A beast whose mother’s milk wasn’t enough so it tore into the flesh brought back from the hunt and learned the joy of drinking the prey’s blood.

Although Eric was by no means someone who disliked war, he could not repress a shudder.

That evening, very little alcohol flowed.

Eric did not return to the camp and instead stayed to sleep at the Plutos mansion, but late that night –

“What is it?” He shouted, leaping to his feet with the alertness that came from being battle-ready during a war, then tensing up. He got changed immediately and went out.

Led by Belmor, who was similarly armed and ready, he entered a building that was slightly apart from the Plutos residence.

In a low-ceilinged room, eight or so men were tied up and on their knees. Ten garrison guards surrounded them.

All of the men were covered in soil. Their faces, arms and legs bore traces of blows, and on some of them, blood was pouring from where their skin had split open.

“Scouts from Allion,” Belmor had explained along the way. “They were wearing Endean armour, so they might have been planning to slip in as spies. They tried to flee when the guards on patrol spotted them and challenged them to halt, but we soon caught them by sending out airships.”

The men were not in the least bit agitated upon seeing Prince Eric. Among them, there were some who must have resisted ferociously and who had been roughed up to such an extent that their faces had been knocked into a different shape, but they did not utter so much as a groan.

“Pretending to be sitting still while moving plenty below the surface,” Eric muttered. “Have them spit out everything they know about Allion’s side.”

“Nothing,” one of the scouts spoke up. Blood was dripping from his mouth which had lost several teeth. “We know nothing. Ordinary soldiers like is at the bottom of the heap could not possibly know anything about Allion’s secrets. You should kill us quickly, O youthful Grand Duke of Ende.”

“Your lives no longer belong to you,” Belmor threatened them expressionlessly. “It is no longer up to you what happens to even a single one of your fingers, or even a single

drop of your blood."

When he sang at banquets and suchlike, Belmor's voice was cute in a way that did not match his bearded face, but when he spoke in a low voice like this, his face expressionless and shrouded in shadows, even Eric could not repress a shudder.

Even so, he felt no compassion for the scouts. This was war after all. You had to be prepared for what would happen if you were captured by the enemy.

"I'll leave the rest to you." Eric left the place. In remaining silent, he had given permission to use torture.

Early the next day, Eric was eating his breakfast at the Plutos mansion as though nothing had happened.

That morning, Thil and Reen, the daughters of Kayness' eldest son, Darowkin, were also present. There was no talk about war.

"Lord Prince, how long will you be staying in Dairan for?" Reen, the younger of the sisters, asked. Eric used to spend most of the year there, so she felt lonely now that he was often away from home, she explained.

"You can't say that he's 'away from home', Reen," her older sister Thil said reproachfully. "From now on, the Lord Prince will always be in Safia. It'll be much rarer for him to be in Dairan like now."

"That's no fun."

"You sound like you have no manners."

"You know, Thil, I've said it before. You always pretend to be a grown-up in front of the adults."

Reen looked so triumphant that Thil, teary-eyed once more, started to protest. It was then that Belmor arrived. Unsurprisingly, he had changed out of the clothes that he had been wearing late last night. He reached for his meal with hands from which the blood had recently been wiped.

Arranged on his low, personal table[3] before him were vegetables, a small portion of rice, and fish from the western lake. Ende's nobles mostly used chopsticks to eat, and

Belmor praised Reen for how good she had become at holding hers.

Fearsome warrior though he was, he was also a good uncle to Thil and Reen, and the conversation flitted from one light-hearted topic to another. Belmor clearly found his nieces utterly adorable, beaming with joy when the two young sisters called him "Uncle" and looking less-than-reluctant when they pestered him to "sing another song for us".

After breakfast, Eric and Belmor returned to camp.

They had managed to get some results. As Belmor spoke of that, the expression he wore seemed to belong to a completely different person from the one who had been at the Plutos mansion.

They had taken each of the eight to a separate location to continue their "questioning" but, at first, all of them had kept their mouths shut. As the "questioning" branched into various different forms, however, they had finally revealed something.

"Prince Kaseria will not take action for another seven days. He's waiting for reinforcements from home."

All eight of them.

Finding that suspicious, Belmor did not loosen his grip. It seemed to him that they might have been instructed to give false information if they were caught. One of them died but, just as dawn was approaching, two of them tremblingly started to talk.

According to them, Kaseria had already led the elite of his troops to the south of Zonga. Beyond the river to the southwest of Dairan which currently formed the national border, there was a forest within which there was an old fortress. It had belonged to a now ruined clan that had used it to fight against the many nomadic tribes in the area. Kaseria was currently lying concealed within that fortress and would soon have a detached advance along the coastline. The plan was for that large force to line up in a conspicuous battle formation, so as to give the impression that Kaseria himself was a part of it. When Ende's army moved to intercept it, Kaseria and his troops at the fortress would strike at their flank…

"When we informed the remaining spies of that, it was obvious at a glance that they were agitated. Looks like it's reliable." As he made his report, Belmor could not conceal his excitement.

It was as though a harsh wind was striking against the Prince of Ende's cheeks.

This is the best possible chance to defeat Kaseria. Eric was of course aware of that. Moreover, and just as he had feared, the scouts had hinted at the possibility of reinforcements. After having dealt with Eric's intercepting troops, they would continue to advance south with an even larger army.

Right – Eric ordered that preparations to march be made in secret. While these were ongoing, they also sent out scouts of their own to cross the border and investigate the area around the forest. However, they could not afford to wait for these to return; the captured scouts did not, after all, know when Allion's forces would start marching from Zonga.

So first, they needed to make their own move. It would be fine for them to advance and then later, when they met up with their scouts and received their reports, decide on their next course of action.

"Shall we send a messenger to Prince Zenon?" Belmor asked. Eric pondered for a moment then shook his head.

"We'll just have to do so 'after the fact'. For now, I want to avoid information leaks as much as possible."

Eric's words sounded plausible, but part of his reason was definitely because he was eager to first establish his own military achievements. Even so, that was not out of some shallow wish to be seen as a hero.

Eric would henceforth be carrying the weight of Ende on his young shoulders and among the retainers, there were many who still doubted his abilities. Thinking about the future, Eric absolutely needed a brilliant military record to his name.

It was after all Eric's decisiveness which had earned him recognition as a successor from his father, who had then been on his deathbed.

Unfortunately however, Eric had yet to acquire any reliable aides or capable strategists to help him draw up plans.

There was, for argument's sake, Kayness Plutos, whom he trusted as an outstanding warrior, but the ones he had waged long years of war against were mainly the nomads and their sporadic raids. They were enemies who excelled at tactics involving surprise

attacks, but they did not use intricate strategies.

In other words, neither Kayness nor his pupil, Eric, had any experience with information warfare.

Furthermore, at the time, Eric was missing another important piece of information, albeit one of a slightly different nature: a little while earlier, a messenger from Crown Prince Gil Mephius had arrived in Safia offering to send reinforcements. Because of a delay in reacting to it however, the news had yet to reach Eric himself.

The capital was still reeling from the rapid succession of events involving the Grand Duke's demise and Jeremie's flight, but it also proved the lack of coordination between Eric – the future ruler – and his retainers.

Actually, when Eric made his decision to launch himself from Dairan, Gil had finished making arrangements with the chief retainers who were in Safia at the time, and had already arrived in Ende. If he had known of that beforehand, Eric's actions might have been very different…

Be that as it may, Eric organised his forces in a great hurry. He would lead a thousand; any more than that, and the enemy might suspect something.

First, he would pretend to be going on patrol and leave with a troop of three hundred and so sent word to Kayness Plutos to "Have them open the gate." This was in case enemy spies were still lurking nearby and to prevent them from realising that they were embarking on military manoeuvres.

They then met up with a force led by Belmor, which had previously left Dairan under the pretext of going to train. A unit of riflemen subsequently left through the gates and caught up with them.

Late that night, they crossed the River Daivim, which formed the border. They had previously sent over several small-sized air carriers, with deliberately long intervals between each, so that horses and weapons were waiting for them on the other side.

At the silent riverside, under the starlit sky, Eric mounted his horse. They were not so far away from their native land, but for some reason, simply for having crossed the border, the cold seemed to pierce his skin.

While fixing his long-handled halberd to his saddle and his sword to his waist, Eric

peered intently towards the darkness before them. Once the soldiers were all assembled, he calmly gave the order to advance.

Part 3

At around the same time as Prince Eric of Ende was leaving Dairan behind him, Gil Mephius was heading north to that very land.

Also around the same period, Mephius' capital, Solon, was about to be rocked by a disturbance for the nth time that year. That day, Ineli Mephius had invited her close friends, as well as those she was planning on becoming close with from here on, to take tea with her. A stack of presents had already piled up.

"Princess, given your position, I'm sure you know how much I have always dedicated myself for His Imperial Highness, the crown prince."

"When that despicable Zaat rose in rebellion and I watched how His Highness bravely chased him down, I became convinced that he was indeed the one worthy of carrying Mephius into its next era."

"Ha ha, you only realised it that late? As for me, I've thought since before even his brilliant first campaign that he has, after all, fully inherited the blood of the imperial family, and that he is greatly different from the norm."

"Oh my, is that so? But when you saw His Highness going out to have fun with his friends, you whispered to me that he was truly deplorable."

"T-That's not what I meant, Princess. That is… That wasn't…"

Surrounded by her entourage, Ineli was at the peak of her glory.

"Now, now, everyone. If you all talk like this at once, I won't know who said what, or what messages I should be transmitting to His Highness."

All around, people were laughing merrily while they pushed others out of the way so as to get even just one step closer to her and hopefully impress themselves on the imperial princess' memory.

The tea party was taking place in the gardens of a mansion belonging to a lady whom Ineli had long been friendly with. However, if there had been any sharp-eyed people among those present, they might have noticed that among the serving boys waiting at the table, among the slaves busy maintaining the gardens, and amid the master

gardeners pruning the various trees, there were a number of men who clearly seemed different from the rest. Their eyes were sharp within their suntanned faces, and they kept a surreptitious watch on the movements of the nobles who crowded around Ineli.

“Princess, did His Highness… did His Highness, Crown Prince Gil, not say anything about me?”

“Hmm, well now, did he…” Ineli placed a finger to her plump lips. “You see, Brother has a very strong sense of duty and never forgets those who have helped him. Just look at how he appointed the gladiators who protected him in Seirin Valley to the position of Imperial Guards.”

“R-Right.”

“Indeed, I see.”

“I know that everyone can’t help but be interested in Brother, but if you want to become closer to the crown prince, it’s enough to simply support him even more than before. Since he never forgets favours…”

At that moment, there was a sound like something being ferociously smashed apart, and a woman’s high-pitched scream loudly rang out.

Startled, everyone simultaneously turned their gaze towards the garden’s entrance. A serving girl had collapsed to the ground. She had been carrying a tray, and the white porcelain teapots and cups that had been on it had shattered into a thousand pieces.

It was not to her, however, that everyone’s eyes were nailed. Rather, it was the men who had probably thrust her aside, soldiers whose ferocious appearance were completely out of place in that setting. Everyone held their breath.

Leading them was Zaas Sidious.

He stepped forward, several dozen of his men following behind him.

The clear blue sky, the white shine of the tea set, the sweetly blooming blossoms – they were all coated in the colour of violence as Zaas walked towards Ineli.

“What business do you have?” Although her eyes betrayed her agitation, Ineli stepped forward, brushing past the nobles who were poised to to start running away. “I do not

recall having invited any louts such as you."

"Nor do I recall having received any invitation," barked Zaas, his face carrying a touch of bestial ferocity. "This is an order from Empress Melissa. Imperial Princess Ineli Mephius, I am to apprehend you at once."

"From Mother?" Increasingly astonished, Ineli went pale.

Properly speaking, an empress could not arbitrarily make use of armed force. However, as the emperor was no longer appearing in public, his influence was dwindling day-by-day and the power balance in Solon had suddenly been thrown into disarray.

In a way, it was Ineli herself who had helped bring about this situation.

"It would be best if you followed us quietly. If you do not, I've been ordered to haul you off by force. Now then…"

Zaas stretched out his arm and caught Ineli's slender shoulder.

"L-Let go!"

Ineli struggled but Zaas' grip was like an iron vice as it bit into her wrist without letting go. She swept her gaze around, pleading for help; but those who moments earlier had been trying to get closer to her, now looked away, increased the distance between them, and tried to look uninvolved.

Zaas drew in his arm; Ineli looked as though she were lightly being pulled into an embrace against his chest. The princess' scream echoed through the blue sky.

It was then that…

"Wait!"

"This is outrageous, General Sidious!"

Voices rose from all around the garden, as their owners simultaneously rushed over. These were the sharp-eyed men who had slipped into Ineli's tea party. They were soldiers serving under Rogue Saian and Odyne Lorgo.

Currently, in Solon, Imperial Princess Ineli had turned into the leading figure of the crown prince's faction. And it was not only her mother who considered that attitude to be dangerous. When Rogue Saian had left Solon, he had left several of his men to watch over her, giving them instructions to "keep a close eye on the imperial princess."

This had been out of concern that she might be plotting something by driving the crown prince's faction forward, but they could not possibly have imagined a situation in which her own mother would bring out the use of force. Even so, they could not simply leave it be. Ineli was undoubtedly a problematic presence; but right now, when people were milling about in confusion over whether to follow the crown prince, Princess Ineli was also a example for them to follow.

Zaas' glared for a second at the unexpected obstacle, but –

"Hah, the crown prince's damn dogs. Wretched mongrels at that, who pretend not to know even when they're aware he's a fake so that they get their feed!" He yelled and gave his men the order to get rid of them by force.

Since things had come to that, Rogue and Odyne's subordinates could only prepare to put up a determined fight. They grabbed the weapons that they had concealed in various places around the garden, and all at once, it turned into a battlefield.

They were equal in numbers, but those on Zaas' side were fully armed. The first to fall in a gush of blood was one of Rogue's soldiers. The noblemen and ladies were screaming and running around, trying to escape, and Ineli was shrieking as loudly as any of them, begging for help, but Zaas continued to drag her out from the garden.

Suddenly, there was someone standing right before him. And very close.

Irritated, Zaas swung his greatsword. The blade was stopped halfway through its movement. Zaas glared again.

"You?"

The one blocking his way was a swordsman with strangely swollen cheeks. Battalion Commander Walt, who had once been in charge of Jozu Fortress. Given his physical appearance, he could not have stealthily crept into Ineli's tea party, but then, in the first place, he was one of her officially invited guests.

His distinguishing feature had been a subject of conversation since the ten-year war,

besides which, he had joined Gil's side after having fought directly against the crown prince; so his heroic life-story had caught Ineli's interest, and she had invited him so that everyone could listen to his tales.

"Damned dog!" Zaas' spittle flew as he launched a second attack.

"Which one of us is the dog, General Zaas?" Retorted Walt, dodging left and right with an agility that did not seem possible with his large build. "You don't look see anything and only act on instinct – what right do you have to call others dogs?"

Incidentally, Walt was not wearing armour but had been provided with formal wear. It had been at Ineli's direction, as she was probably aiming for a discrepancy in his appearance. Despite the difference in their weaponry, Zaas could not bring Walt down while also holding the princess close.

Whereupon, Walt started to boldly fight back. He swiped at the arm that was holding the princess. Faced with his opponent's unexpected move, Zaas hesitated for a second then, thrusting Ineli to the ground, he moved back. Or rather, he was forced back. Walt's sword suddenly halted in mid-air then changed trajectory and almost smashed into Zaas' face. "Tch!" Zaas instantly raised his own sword and struck down the attack.

Amid the shower of sparks, Ineli escaped, crawling along the ground on her hands and knees, very much like a dog. Zaas was instinctively going to chase after her, but Walt was already before him.

"Damn you!"

From Zaas' standpoint, those like Folker, Yuriah or Walt, who had been sent, like him, from Solon to subjugate the Impostor Crown Prince, and who had then nonchalantly chosen to follow that fraud – in other words, those who had once been his comrades who shared the same goal as him – were opponents that he could never forgive.

He swung his sword with the force of a fire. Facing him, it had to be admitted that, for all that his opponent was one of the twelve generals, there was a part of Walt that was thinking – *what a child*.

In truth, however, Zaas was so skilled that it made Walt, who had once won the gladiatorial tournament at the country's Founding Festival, wonder *should I focus on stalling for time?*

Even though his swordsmanship and tactics in a fight were unpolished, he compensated for it in sheer energy. If he allowed himself to be overwhelmed by that for even a second, Walt might easily lose a limb.

Still, that he could so calmly make the decision to focus on defence vividly demonstrated the current difference between Walt and Zaas.

“General!” Amidst that, Zaas’ men called out to him as they came rushing up, covered in blood from their opponents and from their own injuries.

They had not come as reinforcements for him, but to persuade him that dragging things on like this was dangerous. In fact, one of the soldiers from the Silver Axe Division had already hurried from the garden to go and inform General Odyne of what was happening.

Zaas once again clicked his tongue furiously.

“I’ll remember this!” He bellowed before exiting the garden like a gust of wind, his men following behind.

Walt did not chase after them. He too had heard that General Odyne would soon be here, so he would leave the decision of what to do next to him.

“Princess, are you unharmed?”

Walt moved towards Ineli and was going to help her up, but she stood by herself. Her pale cheeks were trembling and she was quivering all over from fear.

She looked around at the attendees, who had scattered as they fled, as she would at enemies who had tried to cut her down. Not a single one could answer her gaze.

“I am going to Odyne,” she announced to Walt, as though pronouncing a verdict against them. “Accompany me. We must punish the fools who are still trying to bring civil war to Mephius!”

Solon, which had been shaken by the dispute between the emperor and the crown prince, was this time rocked as though by a major earthquake by the crack that had appeared between the empress and the princess.

And naturally, Ineli’s rage was beyond anything that Walt and Odyne could assuage.

She ordered the soldiers from the inner palace to capture the empress and Zaas.

Exactly as with her mother, Ineli did not properly have the right to mobilise military forces. However, as she refused to listen to Odyne and arbitrarily decided that these were rebels against herself – and, consequently, against the crown prince – and as there were many who hoped to buy Ineli's gratitude, Odyne was worried that they might take the initiative of lending soldiers to the princess.

If she is allowed to move as she pleases… Odyne came to a decision: so as to prevent Ineli from acting recklessly and unchecked, he took his own soldiers and went to the inner palace.

By that time however, the empress, Colyne, Zaas and several other members of the "Emperor's faction" had already left the court. As for where to: they had headed towards the Dragon Gods' temple.

Needless to say, it was the self-same temple that the emperor had personally ordered built. Living there were the elders who were rumoured to be the pillars of his politics, and it was territory in which Odyne absolutely could not set foot.

An even bitterer pill for Odyne to swallow was the fact that Melissa's faction had travelled to the temple with Emperor Guhl himself. Had he voluntarily gone with them or had the emperor, who was said to be in a weakened condition, been taken there against his will? Given that, a day after the tragedy at the garden, there had still been no official statement from him, it was probably the latter.

The areas in Solon surrounding the palace and the temple abruptly came under complete lockdown. Even at night, watchfires were lit in braziers around the temple and columns of armed soldiers came and went, their blades and spearheads gleaming from the flames.

Seeing the signs of another civil war, the townspeople of Solon fell into a feeling of gloom.

Last time, even though secret feuds were everywhere quietly being played out while the emperor and the crown prince fought, order was not noticeably disturbed, at least within the capital. That however was – somewhat paradoxically considering what had caused it all – thanks to the fact that the emperor was the absolute ruler in control of it.

The emperor's presence had now become insignificant.

Disturbances broke out throughout Solon.

One such case was when, because of an increase in robbery and arson, soldiers misunderstood the situation as having been caused by those of the emperor's faction, and moved of their own accord, escalating the amount of bloodshed. Another even larger one was when an influential noble showed a hesitant attitude, and another aristocrat, perhaps seeing a chance to please the crown prince's faction, unilaterally declared that he too must be plotting a rebellion; and so arbitrarily sent in soldiers to make the arrest, which then developed into a small-scale battle involving both families. Bloody incidents occurred one after another, so that it was almost impossible to believe that this was the same land that had been rejoicing at the return of peace only a few days earlier.

A silhouette was looking down upon it.

Oubary Bilan quietly peeped out from behind a bulky, parted curtain.

He would never open that curtain in broad daylight. He seemed to believe that it was an impregnable defence that would keep at a distance the light of day, or in other words, that would keep at bay the very world which had rejected and excluded him. However, when the sun set and the world had adapted to the black of those curtains, Oubary's feelings seemed to calm down, and he would sometimes peek through the window to the outside.

Something must have happened again somewhere as the people from the neighbourhood and the soldiers were shouting to one another as they rushed along.

He caught sight of the glow of flames appearing over the shadowy streets of Solon. Panicking, he tried to close the curtains, but his hand slipped. Having been almost falling forward in his agitation, he now instead gazed fixedly at the flames.

Oubary stopped moving.

It felt like a hot wind was blowing. As though the flames reflected in his eyes had wrapped around his body, his limbs were suddenly burning hot. Unable to endure the pain, he crouched down. Perhaps trying to block out the flames as quickly as possible, he closed his eyes.

It had the opposite effect however. With his field of vision shut down, his memories resurfaced all the more clearly, and the flames burned brighter than ever.

You too can all die in the flames.

A voice, shouting angrily, suddenly echoed piercingly through his mind. His own voice.

Then perish. You damned fools. When that time comes, it'll be too late to realise that I was right. It'll be too late!

Those were the words that Oubary, having been arrested for the crown prince's assassination, had once asserted before one of the emperor's retainers.

You see, you see, you see, Oubary inwardly chanted like a curse. *It's just as I said. Isn't Solon burning, just as I prophesised? And the fools are perishing in the flames!*

His entire body heaved as he trembled, sweat flying from it to the same rhythm, as Oubary stood up. The muscles bulged on the huge arms he had wrapped around himself.

I was right after all. I was right.

Oubary's eyes slowly opened. His pupils, which once more reflected the flames, were no longer ruled by the same kind of terror as earlier. He had been right – and with that conviction, the entire nightmare of the past transformed into hatred towards the demon-like man who had wrapped himself in the crown prince's skin.

That bastard… The one who'll cut that bastard down… Will be me.

One day, the flames that were constantly burning within his memories would consume his body and soul, leaving nothing but ash that would be scattered in the wind…

Oubary Bilan suddenly felt like screaming. Unlike before, this was not, however, a fit brought about by his nightmares. Whatever the reason, he felt the urge to raise a shout worthy of a warrior and release the energy that was boiling and seething within him.

He wanted steel in his hand.

He wanted to feel the heavy weight of a sword.

At that very moment, there was a violent knock on his door. Oubary turned a sharp gaze towards it.

“What is it?” His voice was a little hoarse, but it was already regaining its former acerbity.

“I have been sent by the empress,” the person behind the door answered in a clearly-projecting voice. “She dearly hopes for General Oubary Bilan’s assistance. The empress has sent for you in the hope that you, the general who once lost so many of his men to a foul trap laid by the Impostor Crown Prince, will surely rise to fight bravely for the emperor, even now that Solon had been engulfed in his evil influence.”

Part 4

The disturbances which had broken out in the capital, Solon, had yet to reach the trade city of Birac and today, as ever, countless numbers of ships were coming and going from its port.

Every ship that flew into the sky, loaded with cargo, passed another that was alighting, laden with goods. Amongst them, there was a ship that had come from the neighbouring country, Garbera, bearing the flag of the Kotjun House, which was fluttering in the blue heavens.

Birac had been performing trade with Garbera even before the reconciliation between the emperor and crown prince. Needless to say, when the ten-year war ended, the first ships to leave Birac for Garbera were those of the ever-hungry-for-business Haman Firm. Perhaps because the Kotjun House had been equally prompt when it came to trade, the two had established ties and the heads of both now frequently sent messengers to each other's residence.

Since the pair were extremely shrewd, rather than saying that they were on friendly terms, theirs was a relationship where each was on guard against the other stealing a march on them.

Immediately upon disembarking, a messenger from the Kotjun House went to see Zaj Haman, and Zaj himself then got in touch with a certain soldier.

"What, the princess!" Gowen unintentionally exclaimed, then quickly stiffled his words.

The messenger also lowered his voice. "The princess seems to have informed the Kotjun House of her desire to return to Mephius some time ago already, however, returning directly to Solon might unnecessarily complicate matters, so for now, she has come to Birac. She says that she is sure that you, Sir Gowen, will handle everything smoothly."

Just doing whatever she wants – thought Gowen, but of course, he did not say it out loud.

Here in Birac, he was still training and organising the new recruits. Naturally, he had heard about the direct confrontation between the Emperor and the crown prince, and,

just a short while ago, he had also heard that Gil had headed to Ende immediately afterwards.

Although he was, of course, glad that Orba had safely won that desperately risky contest, Gowen also knew that it was too early to give way to relief. His workload had not particularly changed since this "victory". Or rather, as the number of volunteers wanting to join the crown prince's forces had only increased, his hours of sleep had been whittled down to even fewer than before.

Now on top of that, with the princess' sudden visit to Birac, he was feeling like every problem was being pushed onto him.

This is all because you just up and left!

It was the same as when Orba had left without saying anything to Hou Ran. At the time, he had harboured a considerable grudge against Orba, and the one he was nursing now was just as big. But anyway, somebody would definitely have to tell the princess. And that role had been left to him.

Gowen steeled his resolve and met the carriage sent by the Haman House. It was unmistakably Princess Vileena who alighted, borrowing the coachman's hand to do so.

They were in the courtyard of Birac Castle. When the girl's slender foot firmly stepped down onto the lawn, Gowen gave a bow.

"It's been a while, Gowen. I will be causing you trouble."



“Not at all.” Mindful of their surroundings, Gowen smiled. “This is perfectly normal, Your Royal Highness.”

“Normal indeed,” Vileena responded, her impish smile conveying that she knew there was nothing normal about it.

Gowen sighed. The princess paid it no mind.

“What is the situation in Solon?”

“Messengers come running every day from the capital. His Highness the crown prince has already led his troops out of the city and, for the present, they are headed for Idolo.”

“I see.” The princess’ expression as she nodded was entirely the same as usual.

Gowen knew, of course, that she had borrowed soldiers from the emperor to turn Salamand away, and that, immediately afterwards, there had been an incident in which she had nearly lost her life. Standing close to her now, however, it was hard to believe that she had lived through such violent scenes.

I wonder what kind of mental state having a daughter like that must leave her father in? Gowen wondered inconsequentially.

He was swiftly pulled back to reality however. As already stated, there was something that he needed to tell the princess. It was for that very reason that he had not brought anyone along with him.

Once he had made sure that the carriage was leaving, he started.

“…The truth of the matter is, Princess… There is something that I must say to you.”

“Honestly, you’re so formal. I refuse to listen to any complaints about His Highness. Because really, I’m the one who wants to throw some at you.”

It was the first time the girl had spoken to him jokingly like that, but her smile faded as she listened to Gowen talk, her eyes grew wider and wider, and by the end, she had gone rigid.

“It can’t be… That…” she murmured, then, “Why?” she asked. “Why would she do such

a thing?"

"We still do not know," Gowen shook his head, his expression serious. "Although she herself has talked about various things, none of them go to the heart of the matter. Perhaps she was tricked by someone, but at present, we do not really know."

It was about Layla. The girl who had once saved Vileena's life in the West and whose warmth had permeated into her heart, had, here in Birac, attacked the crown prince with an assassin's blade – hearing that, there was no way that the princess could remain calm.

"Let me see her," the girl entreated, her body leaning forward but, unusually, Gowen firmly rejected her.

"You cannot. This is the only firm order that His Highness left. He said that once he returns, he will personally interrogate her. Until then, nobody is to be allowed to see her."

Although they had tried to keep the matter with Layla quiet, there were inevitably rumours and, sooner or later, they would have reached the princess' ears. Which was why Gowen had no choice but to deliberately inform her about it. Nevertheless, he naturally could not let Vileena meet directly with Layla, since somehow, she seemed to be aware of the crown prince's past.

Gowen was equally unable to indefinitely hide the news of the princess' return, and by the next day, it had already gone all around Birac. He himself had sent a messenger to the capital to inform Odyne about it. If things showed signs of calming down in Solon, Odyne would surely send to meet with her.

From that day on, the princess also suddenly threw herself into a flurry of activity. She flew airships from morning onwards, circling around the castle grounds. She also announced that she would keep the key to her own room, "for security reasons".

Moreover, once it was known that the princess had returned, there was someone who earnestly requested to meet her in person. Actually, there were many such people in Birac, but this one she recognised.

"I'll see him right away," he was the only one to whom she granted that permission.

When that young man saw her, he got to his knees, looking deeply moved.

“Princess, thank goodness… Thank goodness you’re safe.”

“Please raise your head. It is rather you whose safety I am thankful for. Back then, I was not entirely conscious and I never imagined that my request would have such a terrible impact on your life. Foolish and thoughtless as I was, please forgive me.”

“What are you saying? Seeing you safe, Princess, makes it all worth… no, was worth throwing everything else away.”

The one who spoke in a trembling voice was the Imperial Guard who, after the princess had been shot at, had carried the golden medallion all the way to Birac.

“What is your name?”

“I am called Alnakk.”

The princess murmured his name and smiled with a flash of her white teeth. For Alnakk, who had climbed up from the bottom of the social ladder, having his name be remembered by such a beautiful foreign princess felt like having obtained a long-cherished dream.

Now that she knew his name, the princess, meanwhile, behaved towards him as though he was a long-time acquaintance.

“As a matter of fact, Alnakk, there is one more thing that I desperately want you to do for me,” she brazenly announced.

“Yes? Y-Yes. Anything at all.”

Vileena’s head lady’s maid, Theresia, had, in the past, held a particular thought about her mistress – *she instinctively understands which are the men who cannot go against her*. Vileena, who would soon turn fifteen, had an expression that contained the buds of adulthood. A little more time would be needed before the flower was in full bloom; but, even at this point, there were any number of young men from all walks of life who would yearn to see her face a little closer, and who, for that, would hope to serve as her shield from a bullet or a gun.

Vileena could recognise the young men with that disposition. Especially easy to spot were those like Shique or Alnakk, on whom the princess’ words and actions made a deep impression. The sincere princess was not one to lavish her smiles after

calculating such a thing but, nevertheless, as she lowered her voice and started talking –

"As a matter of fact…"

– There was no way that Alnakk could refuse her.

The reason why Vileena had flown an airship since the early morning was to scope out the surroundings.

She had found one place of interest: a tower southwest of the main hall. It had formerly served as a watchtower, but was now being used for storage. Yet, even though practically no one went there, there were always two guards standing sentry by it.

At the princess' order, Alnakk secretly kept watch on them until late at night and reported back that, twice a day, a soldier seemed to bring meals to that same place. Incidentally, it had officially been announced that Alnakk was serving as Vileena's personal guard. Since most people were aware of how he had come to Birac at the risk of his own life, no one was suspicious of how he entered and left the princess' apartments.

"Then, tonight," said Vileena.

That night, the figures of people appeared at the appointed time. The sentries were on their guard however, as it was not the soldier who usually brought the meals, but a girl dressed as a lady's maid.

The three soldiers, which included the sentries, were subordinates of Gowen's, and they, of course, knew who was inside. Conversely, there were very few people besides them who shared that knowledge. When they questioned her –

"Lord Gowen has ordered that the one inside be given a wash," was the answer they received.

Apart from the meal, the lady's maid also had a large cloth folded over her arm. Certainly, since the prisoner locked up inside was a woman, this was not a task that men could perform.

"Still, we didn't hear anything about it. I'll go and check with the Captain."

Just when one of them was about to start running off, they heard a gruff voice.

“Oh, look at that. Someone here’s having a secret tryst at this hour.” A drunk-looking man was approaching. “In a place like this, very suspicious. Hey, hey, let me join in. If you do, I won’t tell your boss.”

The way he unheedingly raised his voice out loud worried the sentries. They did not want to draw attention to this place.

“Please be careful,” the lady’s maid whispered to the sentries. “Lord Gowen told me about it. That gentleman is called Alnakk and he has only just become a soldier to the princess. He is sniffing about for the prisoner’s whereabouts.”

“What?”

Since Alnakk was still coming closer and talking louder and louder, one of them went up to stop him.

“You seem pretty drunk. Even if you go further, there’s nothing here. Now then, go back to your own room.”

“Oh? You trying to start something? I might not look it, but I used to be an Imperial Guard serving directly under the emperor.”

He pushed forward through sheer brute strength, so the other guard had no choice but to also go and help. Just before he did so, he sent the lady’s maid on her way.

“Finish your business quickly.”

He handed her the key. The lady’s maid nodded, and stepped into the tower.

Naturally, the sentries had failed to realise that she was actually the princess. She had asked Alnakk to come up to them, pretending to be drunk, so as to create a sense of trust by having the soldiers recognise that they had a ‘common enemy’.

She climbed the dimly-lit staircase. At the end, there was a door. Beyond it lay a circular room and another door that blocked further passage. A padlock hung from it. Opening it with the key, she saw that inside there was a single woman, who was stirring slightly.

“Layla…” her voice unintentionally escaped.

It was undoubtedly Layla within that cold stone-room. This was the girl who had once taken care of the princess when she had collapsed in the west, and who had loved Vileena – who was compelled to use the false name 'Luna' – like her own little sister.

As though startled, the girl got up from the bed and stared at Vileena's face. She looked as though she was about to run away, but her ankles were chained to the bed and staggered forward.

"Layla!"

"Princess…"

Tears started streaming down Layla's face as soon as she had spoken. She looked away and began to wail as she crouched down.

Driven by her own emotions, Vileena closed the distance between Layla and herself. Just as she was about to touch her shoulders, Layla, perhaps unconsciously, shook her off. The tray that had been carrying the meal tumbled to the floor, but neither of them paid it any attention.

For a short while, the stone walls, which were indistinguishable from the shadows, simply absorbed Layla's sobbing. Vileena's chest felt filled to bursting. Pity and doubts were swelling within her, and she groped about for the right words to say to Layla, but – "Why?" – in the end, what broke the long silence were words that were too straightforward.

"Why did you.. the prince…"

When she heard the word 'prince', Layla's shoulders gave a jerk. Her wails grew noticeably louder. Vileena was unable to say anything further.

The princess had considered all sorts of possibilities before coming. She simply could not believe that Layla had, from the start, been a spy working for some enemy. Even if she had gotten close to wait for a chance to assassinate the crown prince, there was too much that was accidental in her encounter with Vileena. Then, why? What on earth could have driven such a calm-looking girl to attempting a crime like that of murdering the country's crown prince?

The princess could not begin to imagine.

Just then,

“I,” Layla spoke in a trembling voice. “I was robbed of my future by His Imperial Highness, the Crown Prince.”

“That,” having braced herself to ask the question, Vileena was momentarily at a loss for words. “What… do you mean by that?”

The two of them drifted into silence again. Outside, Alnakk’s voice could still faintly be heard rising a racket. The princess’ heart beat violently. For some reason, she felt that staying here any longer was unbearable to her. She had a premonition that she was about to hear something terrifying – a secret so outrageous concerning the country and its people, that it would have to remain hidden in the shadows in the future without ever appearing in the open – that it would threaten to tear her to shreds just as much as it did Layla.

And then –

While Vileena was hesitating about what to say, Layla, between her tears and her sobs, slowly started to talk.

About how her father, Rone, had been an Imperial Guard under the emperor’s direct command. About how, originally, she should already have been married now and living with her husband in Solon.

“It was during the wedding ceremony…”

Time and time again, tears fell with every blink of her eyes and ran down her cheeks. And yet, her eyes were lacking any feeling of intense emotion, and she looked as though she were detachedly discussing someone else’s story.

It was instead the princess who, in the next instant, had her chest pierced as though by an arrow with strong emotions.

“In the middle of the ceremony, Crown Prince Gil suddenly appeared. And he claimed his right to the first night. Yes… I was forced away from the one who was supposed to become my husband and told to share a bed with the prince.”

“Impossible…” Vileena murmured unthinkingly. “That kind of… It’s impossible…”

“Right. It’s impossible. It’s unthinkable.”

Layla’s eyes once again filled with tumultuous emotions. And what she said next, her tears scattering all the while, reverberated like thunder against the stone walls of that cold room.

“Because that man… There’s no way he can still be in this world. My father was supposed to have killed Crown Prince Gil Mephius. He died! Right in front of my eyes!”

Afterword

Now then.

This is a space in which the author should talk about something.

But I can't just start idly rambling about this and that.

"Rakuin no Monshou" will end in the next volume. Please look forward to what kind of ending we are approaching.

Hmm, well. Having said what I wanted to, what can I fill this blank space with?

Times like these call for that: the 'when-in-trouble, bring-out-old-files' technique.

And close at hand – which is to say, on my laptop's hardrive – I have a text file named "Kingdom Series Composition". It is a rough outline for the series that I made right before I started the seriously writing for "Rakuin" (whose provisional title at the time was "Shadow Kingdom"). Although, since there was also the possibility that it might not be popular and thus immediately get cancelled, I really had no idea how many volumes it would be, so it is a really short document. And what it contains is…

Volume 1: Orba vs. the Garberan rebels. The main course of events concerns the interactions between the gladiator-turned-crown-prince Orba and Princess Vileena.

Volume 2: Mainly about Orba and Vileena at the royal palace. (And about Guhl's schemes?) While trying to find out about his brother, Orba deliberately murders Oubary out of rage. Because of that, Orba's situation at the palace reaches a crisis point but… Meanwhile, with its sorcerers at the centre of things, Ende is preparing to start a large-scale war.

Volume 3: Vs. Ende. After somehow or another blocking the emperor's moves, Orba, through Vileena's intervention, gets Garbera's army to move and catches Ende in a two-pronged attack. The war is ended when the prince of Ende who is to become the next Grand Duke admonishes the sorcerers and gathers the country behind him. Signature of a triple alliance.

Originally, it was a file for my own reference only, and although there are parts where

the language kind of fails, but well, please enjoy. Looking at it now, it seems like I was thinking along the lines of “At any rate, let’s aim to finish a first part in three volumes.” If by that time it had gotten popular enough, I was planning on stirring up interest by saying “Orba’s fight has only just begun!” No, I wasn’t being irresponsible. It’s the law of the jungle. Survival of the fittest. The losers leave quietly. Yep.

Thinking about it again, I can’t help but feel surprised: seriously, this series actually went over ten volumes. Since this is also thanks to Mr. 3’s robust illustrations and Dengenki Bunko’s amazing advertising power, I don’t feel that this is my achievement alone, but even so, if you, the readers, keep the name “Sugihara Tomonori” in a corner of your hearts, then I would be deeply grateful.

…Honestly, it really looks as though I’m suddenly bringing things to an end right here, but the critical point for the author actually starts here. At the same time as Orba cuts through the situation with his ingenuity and his sword, the author will be tapping away at his keyboard and filling the white screen on his laptop with written words. When thinking that this series will end in the next volume, I can’t deny feeling some strong emotions, but honestly, I can’t afford to indulge in that sentimentality right now. Today again, let’s head off once more to that other world, to breathe the same air as Orba and Vileena, and feel the same wind against my face.

Well then.

I look forward to the day that I can meet you all again in the afterword to the final volume.

--Sugihara Tomonori

Translator's Notes and References

1. Kaseria is slipping in an apposite quote from Confucius to support his actions.

2. Called *kiseru*, this was a type of pipe that was smoked in Edogawa Japan.

3. Eric and the Plutos family are eating at the kind of low, single-person tray-like tables that you might see in some traditional Japanese inns.


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